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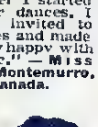
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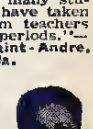


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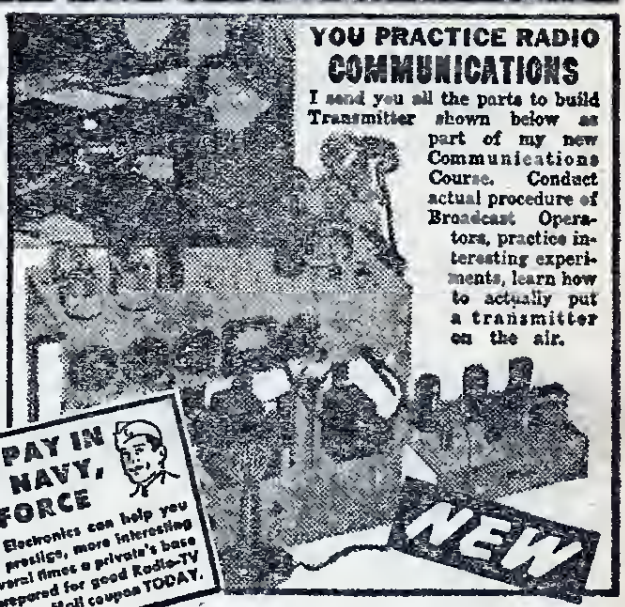
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MARVEL SCIENCE FICTION

Robert O. Erisman, Editor
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MAY 1952
Vol. 3
No. 6
ALL BRAND NEW

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Where did it come from? they asked Sylvia. —From somewhere, was all she'd say...Why had it come?—To feed....But on *what*?.....

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A TRUE I. C. S. STORY *taken from an actual letter*



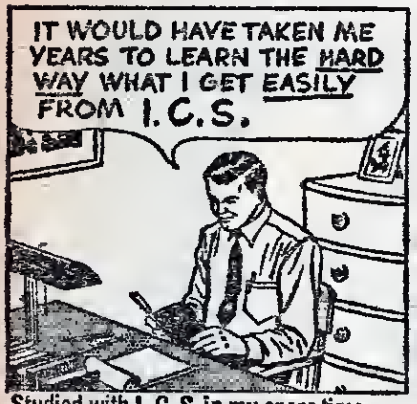
I was a World War II pilot . . .



A prisoner of war in Germany . . .



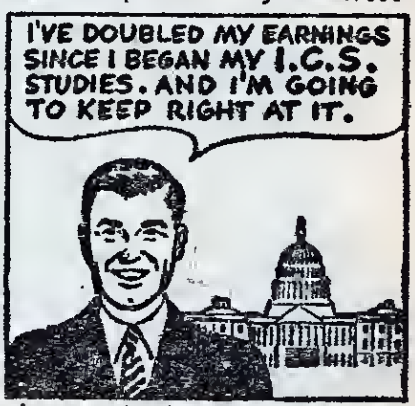
Back home, I was hired by National . . .



Studied with I. C. S. in my spare time . . .



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SHE KNEW THE FACE



NO, THE GIRL HAD CONTACTED SOMETHING MUCH WORSE THAN THAT

OF EVIL

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

GRIPPING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL!



Where did it come from? they asked Sylvia. —From somewhere, was all she'd say . . . Why had it come?—To feed . . But on what?

CHAPTER I

PLOUKE

"AN ATOM explodes inside the sun. Springing out from this tiny explosion is a radiation which we call 'light'. Nine minutes after an atom explodes on the sun, those of us on the sun-ward side of Earth find another atom vibrating sympathetically within our own brains. We call this 'seeing'. At approximately thirteen minutes after the explosion on Sol, the Martians experience the same vibration within their brains. They call their response 'plouke'."

On the lecture platform, the professor paused as if to lend emphasis to what was to be said next. This was one of his big moments, the time when he instructed these uninformed college students in the mystery of the universe. He took a deep breath.

"It is as if a gigantic harp had been plucked on the sun and all the solar system, perhaps even all creation throughout the universe, vibrates in sympathetic response."

He was rewarded with a little stir of motion running through the student body. His words seemed to awe them and they seemed to express that awe in little unconscious movements of the hips.

"We are completely unaware of the original atomic explosion on Sol which gives rise to the radiation to which we respond."

Pausing again, he took a deep breath.

"The question is— *To what other events, taking place at unimaginable distances from us, are we also responding without knowing it?*"

In the middle of the big lecture hall, Jan Martin listened with one quarter of his attention. So far as he was concerned, Professor Alex Thompson was an old fuddy-duddy with a penchant for asking questions which could not be answered. He wondered how the professor would react if he had even an inkling of the events taking place literally under his nose but of which he was completely unaware. He imagined that such knowledge would probably send the professor running screaming to the nearest psycho for help. Jan suppressed a grin at the thought and continued listening with one quarter of his mind.

He had other uses for the remainder of it.

One part of it was on the spring day outside. A red bird was whistling in an elm tree. A wind was blowing up from the southland. There was a fragrance in the air. These things held part of his attention.

Two rows ahead of him Sylvia turned her sleek head. He was instantly aware of the motion. She held a part of his attention, always.

"What gives, Jan?" Her voice whispered out of nowhere into his mind.

"Nothing gives," he answered in the same way. "Thompson talks. The students listen. There's a red bird singing. And you are very beautiful."

He felt the throb of her answering response. If they had used words to express this feeling, they might have selected such words as, "Dearly beloved—" but in the communion established between them there was no need for words, where the impulse itself flowed free and clear, no other form of communication was necessary.

"Thank you, dear. I love you too," her answer came, as soft as the smell of lilacs on a spring wind. Then there was a catch. "Jan—"

"Yes."

"There's fear here."

"Um." His awareness came instantly out of focus on her. He sent it swiftly through the big lecture hall, seeking the source of the fear she had mentioned. "Some of the more excitable boys are getting their wind up. Thompson's concepts are creating a fear disturbance on the emotional level. But that happens all the time. It's nothing to be concerned about"

"I know, Jan. But—there's something else."

THERE WAS fear in the wordless, telepathic whisper that came to him, fear that startled him as nothing else on Earth would have done.

"What is it?" The words shot from him like bullets from a gun.

"I do not know."

"What is its source?"

"Please, Jan, I do not know. It may not be fear, not quite. That may be the projection of my own feelings, my interpretation of the stimulus. It may actually be—threat."

The single word whispered soundlessly within the network of his mind.

It was a simple little word, it had no meaning in itself, but inside of him it was like the buzz of the tails of a dozen rattlesnakes coiled and ready to strike.

"Threat directed against whom?"

"I don't know, Jan. Maybe.... against all of us."

"Against all of us?" His words were a harsh echo that demanded acceptance, rejection, or modification, and demaded it instantly.

"I can't be certain, Jan. It's such an intangible thing. I can neither imagine nor conceive of any force strong enough to be a threat to all of us, but that's the way I sense it—against all of us."

"The source?"

"I cannot detect it."

"Can you imagine it?"

"No. It goes beyond the limits of my imagination."

"Oh." Jan was silent. If tails of the snakes had been thrumming loudly before, they were twice as loud now. If this threat went beyond the limits of Sylvia's imagination, then it must be dangerous indeed! He knew her imagination. Until this instant he had not known there was a limit to it.

Jan squirmed in his seat as his body structure imitated and moved into resonance with the problem in his mind. *A threat that lay beyond the limits of Sylvia's imagination.* He became aware of the squirming movement.

"How much time remains before the threat becomes real?"

"It may be the next instant, the next hour, the next week—or it may never become real."

He cursed softly and silently. "And if it becomes real, what happens?"

"A lot of us—will die," her answer came.

At her answer, ice water seemed to spread itself all over Jan's body. He was cold, cold, cold! Die! There was a word that even the science of the Twenty Second Century could not answer. And Sylvia, in a voice that was like the whisper of wind through an icy cave, was saying that a lot of them—would die.

What was the threat that she sensed? What was the source of this fear that touched the tendrils of her mind? What—

The professor's dry voice announced the ending of the lecture period. "And until the next session of this class, I leave you to meditate on this question— *To what other events, taking place at unimaginable distances from us, are we also responding without knowing it?"*

THE CLASS, with a rustle of plastic clothing and a stir of feet impatient to be about more interesting activities, was rising and was moving toward the exits.

Jan moved into step beside Sylvia. She glanced up at him. A smile appeared on her face and a deeper smile gleamed within the depths of her eyes.

"Jan! How nice to see you." Her voice held overtones of surprise and of pleasure. A casual onlooker would have thought she was greeting him for the first time in days. No one would have guessed that when she awakened this morning, her head had been on the pillow beside his face.

Nor would any onlooker have found it possible to guess that any form of communication beyond words existed between them.

"A tindala, perhaps?" he said.

"The very thing I was hoping you would say!" She hooked her hand into the crook of his arm. He was aware, as he always was aware, of her nearness, aware also of something else that he always caught in her presence, a kind of a tingling pleasure that seemed to radiate from her and seemed to have sexual connotations. Other men seemed to catch the same radiation in some degree. Eyes were turned toward her. Some of them were bold. But always, as they glanced at the man with her, the boldness changed abruptly into watchful wariness. They moved along the walks toward the favorite

loafing place of the college students.

"What is it, Syl?"

"Jan, I do not know. I know only that it is dangerous. Very dangerous. I know also that it is coming closer."

"Um." Jan was silent while he considered a problem in his mind.

"I already have." Sylvia spoke.

"What? You have called them?"

"Of course. We need them. Ah. Here comes the first one now but he doesn't as yet know he has been sent for."

"Syl, damn it!"

A youth was coming along the walk toward them. Dressed in shorts, his shirt open at the throat, his skin brown and tanned, he looked like any other college student. But there was a difference, though none that the casual eye could detect.

At the sight of them, his face broke into a grin. "Sylvia!" He did not seem to see Jan at all.

"Richard!" Her response to his greeting was effusive.

"Heading for a tindala, no doubt." For the first time, he seemed to become aware of Jan. "Run off that goof who is walking with you and join a real man for your tindala."

"Richard the lady-hearted lion," Jan said.

Richard Carson's face showed mock surprise. "Jan? You here! I never noticed it was you until this instant. If you hadn't spoken, I would have never noticed you. A tindala? Certainly, I will join you. You're buying, no doubt?" Hooking Sylvia's free hand into his arm, he moved down the street with them.

"Shall I strike him dead?" Jan said to Sylvia.

She patted his arm reassuringly. "No, Jan. After all, he may be good for something!"

"Good for what? Obviously there is no point in saving such a scrawny specimen for seed..."

"Jokers! Jokers we've got among us. Just because I'm going to take your girl away from you—"

"Whose girl away from whom?" Sylvia spoke. "I'm my own girl."

For an instant it looked as if Dick Carson was going to burst into tears. "Oh, Sylvia, this is so sudden. Up until now I had hope."

"Hope, who?" Jan spoke quickly. "I don't know any Hopes. What's her tel number?"

"Dick, if you give him her tel number, I'll scratch her eyes out!" Sylvia said emphatically.

"My goodness, jealousy!" Dick murmured.

LAUGHTER rolled across the campus, a simultaneous burst from all three of them that pulled inquiring and wistful eyes toward them, wistful eyes which said that they wished that they, too, could share in this laughter.

Then the laughter was gone and Dick Carson's was seeking Sylvia's face. "What is it, you two?"

" 'Death and famine on every side
And never a sign of rain.
The bones of those who have
starved and died
Unburied on the plain.' "

Jan Martin spoke.

Without a pause, Dick Carson continued.

" 'What care I if the bones bleach
white?
Tomorrow they may be mine!
I shall sleep in your arms tonight
And drink your lips like wine.' "

Sylvia's hands tightened on the arms of each of them as Dick finished. "What makes?" he said softly. "I can sense there's something wrong."

"We do not know," Jan answered. "Something comes in upon us, from somewhere."

"Upon all this?" Doubt sounded in Dick's voice. His eyes swept the serene blue of the sky above them, the green of the grass upon the lawns, the lilacs bursting into purple explosions, the yellow of the jonquils that lined the walks, a beautiful, a pleasant, and a peaceful scene. "What can come in

upon all this? What can come against us?"

"It comes," Jan answered. "Syl says so and I believe her."

A slight shudder seemed to pass across the face of Richard Carson. It was instantly gone. A shrug replaced it. "Well, Brannus be with us."

"The Branni are already gathering," Sylvia's thinking went into his mind. "They are responding. And you were sent for, since you are the nearest one."

"Eh!" Surprise held Dick's face immobile. "Do you mean you sent for me?"

"Of course."

"Yike!" Dick exploded into voiced sound. "And here I thought I came out to take a walk of my own free will. You ought to ring a bell or something, to announce your intrusion below the level of my awareness. Yike and yike again!" A clearly visible shudder went over his finely moulded feaures.

"Neophytes always have that feeling," Jan said gently. "Until they develop their awareness to the point where there is nothing that is below the level of their awareness, they are always surprised to find they have taken actions which were not of their own free will. They get over it. Eventually they become aware when they are summoned."

"Then at least there's hope."

"I thought we had agreed to keep this strange girl's name out of this conversation," Sylvia said icily.

Again laughter exploded.

But under the surface there was, if not turmoil and anxiety, at least a deeply concerned awareness of the potential shape of things to come.

CHAPTER II

MELANCIUS

"And I conceive of one that's the Prince of Dark Bodies: Melancius.

"That upon the wings of a superbat, he broods over this earth and over other worlds, perhaps deriving something from us...a super-evil thing that is exploiting us...

"I think he's a vast, black, brooding vampire..." THE BOOKS OF CHARLES FORT, *circa* 1930.

MELANCIUS!

Out in the depths of space beyond Pluto where even the planet ships have not yet gone, a shadow moved. It was both black and not black. Light from the stars showed through it but there was a curious distortion of the images of the stars when seen through this body, like an object glimpsed through rising heat waves.

The shadow seemed to float in the void. It was moving but in these vast depths of space even tremendously speedy movement was hardly perceptible

Moving, the shadow brooded. It seemed to be aware of the depths of space around it, of the suns and the planetary bodies in these depths, but the perception-registration system by which it noted the existence of suns and of planets was utterly different from any sensory system known to humans.

The shadow was aware, tremendously aware. It was aware of icy Pluto, of ringed Saturn, of mighty Jupiter turning solemnly in his orbit around the sun. It was aware of Mars, that dry, arid wasteland of inhospitable desert.

It was aware of...

Third planet out from the sun!

Something existed there that was new. Something there had come to fruition. Something there was worth investigating. Well worth investigating.

Eagerness quickened through the shadow.

The brooding vanished from it.

It swerved in its course aud with tremendously accelerated speed moved in toward the center of the solar system.

Third planet out from the sun!

IN THE night, Sylvia drowsed to partial wakefulness. She lay in a semi-wakeful state, her awareness at low level, somnolent as she was. At her side, Jan's breathing was soft and rythmic.

The night was quiet, almost without sound of any kind. Somewhere tires whispered on a street. Overhead there was a soft rustle which she identified as helocopter vanes and once, from the far distance, came a gentle thrum of sound, the backwash of a distant rocket, one of the moon freighters coming in to a landing at the space port. From somewhere came a burst of laughter, then the sound of song.

"For we all came to college
But we didn't come for konwledge,
So we'll raise hell while we're here."

A whole chorus of male voices roared out the words. Listening, but not more than half awake, Sylvia smiled. They were having fun out there. It was fun to be young and vibrantly alive. It was fun, also to be where she was, sleeping beside a man. The culture required that they be married; they had conformed to the culture. It was easier, simpler, perhaps more satisfying that way. You did not defy your culture, the mores of your group, even if you were a Branni.

The Society of Brannus, the members of which called themselves Branni...

The name was meaningless, a word that somebody had selected, a spoken sound, a written word. The Branni themselves formed a society, a group, that was without form and without structure. It held no regular meetings, it had no constitution and by-laws, it was not incorporated, its members met in little groups of three, four, or five, apparently friends having fun, but it included in its membership the top minds on the planet Earth. Englishmen, Frenchmen, Chinese, Bulgars, Mexicans, Negroes, Americans—the Branni recognized neither racial nor political boundaries.

It was a new organization. Individuals who had possessed the qualities of the Branni had existed before on Earth, one here in that century, another in this century, but never before in the history of the planet had enough of them existed at one time to form an organization.

The qualities they possessed—including the one supreme quality which made an individual a Branni—were the products of evolution. In one sense, they were the forerunners of the coming human species. What they were in the Twenty-Second Century, all men might be in the Fortieth Century. They were all ages, ranging from a sprightly alert old gentleman of 88 to a bright young lady of 11. They belonged to all professions, chemists, lawyers, doctors, a plumber, several farmers, one banker, two of the world's foremost physicists, several outstanding politicians, and a master mariner who jumped the moon ships up to the surface of Luna.

The Society of Brannus had four reasons for existing. One was to help each other. The second was to help anyone else who needed help and who had enough intelligence to seek and accept it. The third was to guide deftly and competently the activities of the human race. There was a fourth reason, much more complex than the others. Stated simply, it was—to protect.

To protect—the human animal. They worked their protection in various ways. If the government of Indo-China had words with the government of its neighboring country, and it looked as if the words might develop into blows, several Branni detached themselves from their investigations and traveled to the point of danger. There, unobtrusively and without letting their purpose become known, they began their business of manipulating the thoughts and feelings of the im-

portant officials involved in the trouble.

THE PRECEDING fifty years had been without armed conflict of any kind. Even the United Nations had never been able to prevent local wars. They were being prevented now. The newspapers, the magazines, the telecast commentators were unanimous in reporting that the golden age of peace had been reached, in saying that now man had reached his long-sought goal of peace.

What neither the historians nor the commentators ever knew or reported was that the Branni, not the natural instincts of the human animal, had brought about these fifty years of peace.

The golden age of the Twenty-Second Century had begun with the organization of the Society of Brannus.

How did one get to belong to the Society? Lying half asleep in the darkness, Sylvia thought of the way she had gotten to become a Branni. The one basic requirement was the possession of telepathic ability. After she had discovered this ability in herself, as a child of 10, she had thought for a long time that she was the only person who possessed such an ability. She had carefully concealed it from her parents. They had adored their daughter hut they had never glimpsed the hidden potentiality that existed in her. They had regarded her as a happy average child interested in everything including having a good time, and she was all of that. And something else hesides.

She still remembered the thrill that had come to her when she had first discovered that someone else also possessed that something else. The person had heen Jan Martin. At that time, both had heen in high school, each easily making his way through a course of study that was ahout as difficult for them as the alphabet is for a normal child.

Following that first, breath-taking discovery had come others. Eventually she and Jan had found a spry little old man who had grinned delightedly at them and told them they were Branni. His name had been John Bergson. Through him, they had met others.

It was odd that no one besides a Branni ever knew for sure that the Brannie existed. Except for miracles, which the Branni never produced, no usual person had ever been convinced that strange and different people lived, moved, and had their being on this Earth.

If you were a Branni, you eventually found your own kind. You knew them when you found them.

If you were not a Branni you never knew that the Branni existed. In the distance she could hear singing again—

"In the evening by the moonlight—"

As she listened, very dimly aware of the song, she was aware of a voice whispering in her mind.

"Sylvia?"

She was instantly wide awake. "Yes."

"This is John Bergson. I'll he up in a few minutes."

"John Bergson! I'm so glad you could come."

"I picked up your call, my dear. Of course I would come."

"Please come right on up. Jan. Jan!" She reached out to touch Jan in the darkness.

"Huh? What is it? I mean—" Roused from sleep, he presented a picture of confusion.

"John Bergson is here!"

Jan's confusion vanished instantly. A grin lit his face. "Bergson! Let him in."

Sylvia was already at the door, opening it. A spry, white-haired, henevolent-faced old gentleman in a loud sport jacket stepped through it. He swept Sylvia into his arms in an embrace that almost cracked her ribs, pumped Jan's hand. Although physically, Bergson was thin and frall looking, there was strength in him, a warm, flowing kind of strength that

both Sylvia and Jan sensed.

TWO MINUTES later he was sitting on the edge of the bed and was asking them what had happened.

"Sylvia sensed something coming in upon us," Jan said.

"Nothing more definite than that?"

"That was definite enough," Sylvia said.

Under Bergson's deft questions, she repeated essentially the same information she had given Jan.

"I see," Bergson said quietly. "It was my first impression there was trouble locally and that you two needed help. Are you sure—" His eyes sought Sylvia.

She started to answer, then stopped. Outside in the night, the male chorus was busy with another song—

"We are poor little sheep who have lost our way.
Baaaa, baaa, b—"

The song ended in a scream.

There was in that scream pain and fear and hurt beyond the understanding of any man who has not known these emotions to their ultimate extent. The scream came from a single throat, in ultimate fear and ultimate terror.

A split second later, other throats were screaming. The night, that had been filled with song, was suddenly filled with pandemonium.

Then the screams went into silence.

Running feet pounded in the darkness.

"It's come in upon us!" Sylvia whispered. "It slipped in upon us while my attention was elsewhere!" As she spoke, she slumped forward.

"You take care of her," Bergson spoke quickly. "I'll go see what's happening out there."

Within half an hour slightly frantic announcers were pouring the news out over the air waves.

"At about twelve thirty tonight, a mysterious tragedy struck the college town of Newport. Twelve college students, enganged in drinking beer and singing songs in preparation for their annual beer-song festival, were suddenly struck dead as if by a bolt from the blue. From our fragmentary reports, it seems that the hastily summoned doctors have no inkling as to the real cause of the tragedy. Rescue squads are still working in an effort to revive the stricken men but so far, their efforts have been unavailing. We will give you additional reports as soon as they are flashed from the scene of the tragedy."

To Melancius, the taste of this new energy was very good. If he had had veins, it would have sent a surge of new life through them. Since he had no veins, the energy extracted from the life forms he had destroyed surged through the channels peculiar to him. He felt an elation such as he had not known in centuries.

The energy-producing life forms on this planet had certainly developed nicely. The crop was just right. He could range the spaces near this planet, returning here to feed, for centuries. There was not even any danger here. The energy-producing life forms on this planet had not yet developed to the point where they could even become aware of him, let alone threaten his existence.

At this realization, his elation grew. The chance to feed in saftey, to grow fat in his own peculiar way, was his!

CHAPTER III

SOMETHING

JAN GATHERED Sylvia in his arms. She lay there limp and almost lifeless, hardly breathing. He laid her gently on the bed. Her pulse was barely perceptible. Lying there, she looked like she was a little girl sleeping.

But this was not normal sleep, he knew. This was the sleep of some kind of psychic shock. "It comes in upon us," she had whispered, and had upbraided herself for not being alert to its

coming—whatever *it* was—and had slumped down.

He knew without quite knowing bow he knew it that deep centers of her brain had been disturbed, resulting in this psychic shock.

He sent bis thoughts probing gently inward. There bad not been a time since they first discovered each other when his thoughts bad not met an alert response from ber, there had never been a time when he had failed to contact her.

He failed now.

His prohing thougbts met a glass wall.

He felt a touch of panic rise in him. Was she dead? At the thought, his panic mounted. She was still breathing, he could see the slow, gentle rise and fall of her breasts. She was still allve then. At that knowledge, his panic went down. Again he sent bis thougbts seeking telepathic contact wlth her.

Again be failed to make contact.

For Jan Martin, this was a bad moment, perbaps the worst moment he had ever faced ln bis life. To him, living to a large degree meant this girl. Without ber, life would be barren, without meaning. With ber, the world was a wonderful place, filled with surprise and interest, and somehow or other, the sound of soft music. Without her—he preferred not to think of what life would he without ber. And he could not reacb her, could not contact her.

Had something struck her as it had apparently struck the slngers?

The thought was agony in itself.

He sat beside the bed, unaware of the night and the sounds of the nlght. Somewhere sirens were screaming, ambulance hells were clanging. He did not bear them. Voices were shouting. He was aware of them. His attention was fully and completely concentrated on the girl on the bed.

Very softly, he began speaking, using a techinque that was at least two centuries old.

"You can bear me."

Over and over be repeated the phrase. "You can hear me. You can hear me. You can hear me..." He knew that the sound waves entered ber ears, that to some degree she was aware of his voice. How deep did his voice penetrate? He did not know. It *might* reach deep centers of her brain, because of what he said, she *might* be able to hear bim.

He changed the words.

"You can breathe deeper." Over and over again he repeated them. As he spoke, his eyes were intent on her breasts. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he saw the response begin. Slowly she began to breathe deeper.

At tbe sigbt, Jan Martin's heart climbed up to bis mouth. Sbe was responding to his voice tones!

Again he changed the words.

"You can wake up if you want to."

THE FIRST response was a fluttering of the eyelids. Then the eyes opened. For an instant, borror showed in them, memory of something that bad come with her out of the land of unconsciousness. Then she sat up, and the horror was gone. Jan felt bis pulse leap. She was awake, she was live, she was in contact with him. Then sbe was in his arms and he was hugging and patting her. She wasn't crying, she wasn't really trembling, she wasn't really afraid. She had moved to his arms hecause there was protection, there was where sbe belonged, there was s a f e t y, security—there was peace—there was life.

"What did you feel, Sylvia, just before you fainted?" His mind was reaching ber mind now, he was ln direct telepathic contact with her.

"There are no words to describe it. Something."

"Where did it come from?"

"I could not tell. From somewhere."

"What was it doing?"

A shudder went over her. "*Feeding.*"

"Feeding?" His thought was sharp. "On what?"

"On the ones who died. It was not

feeding in any way we use and understand the word, it was feeding in another sense, in another way, feeding on the energies of the human body."

He was silent, his mind busy. Too busy. There seemed to be an established law in nature that one life form should feed on another life form. This order extended clear down to the single-celled creatures and to plants which fed on primal substances, molecules, atoms, perhaps on smaller particles. An energy exchange was involved in which one life form absorbed and utilized the energy that had been created by another life form.

Logically there might be a life form which could extract directly the energy from the human body.

The thought sent shudders of cold over Jan Martin's body.

"What—what happened outside?" Sylvia whispered.

"Bergson has gone to see," Jan answered.

Tears appeared in her eyes. "I feel very sorry for them," she said.

"I know....I know...." She was trying to express sympathy for the dead. The terror of the dark, the terror of the abyss which all life must face—out there in the spring night men had been singing songs. Suddenly they had gone into the darkness, into the abyss. They had been living. Now they were dead. Neither Jan nor Sylvia needed to go to the scene to know what had happened. Nor had Bergson needed to go to know the results. He had gone to see what he could do to help.

A soft knock sounded on the door. Jan went quickly to open it. Bergson entered.

The elderly scientist seemed to have aged years in the short time he had been gone. His face was white, there were beads of perspiration on his face, his step had lost its springy stride. Jan held out a quick arm. Grateful for it, Bergson took it. Jan had to help him to a chair, where he slumped down.

For a moment he sat there, his head cupped in his hands. With an effort of pure will, he lifted his face.

"As bad as that?" Jan said quietly.

"Worse," Bergson said. "There was nothing I could do so I came away." He looked at Sylvia. "What information do you have?"

He listened quietly while Sylvia told her story. "Feeding?" he mused, when she had finished. "It fits. There are dead men out there who look as if the *elan vital* had been sucked out of them. Something feeds upon us." His face was wry and twisted and wretched. "And we have no knowlege as to what it is or how it comes or what it does." He took a deep breath and sighed.

"This calls for help. This calls for those of us who can get here the quickest."

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his chair.

Jan and Sylvia watched. They knew what was happening. From the far corners of the Earth, from Tokyo, from Aberdeen, from the plains of India to Basque villages in the Pyrnees, the Branni were being summoned.

Sumoned to meet a menace that had come in from nowhere.

After a few minutes, Bergson opened his eyes. He seemed to have gained strength and courage. "Schmuzu will catch the next plane," he said. "There's nobody I'd rather work with than that Yellow Buddha. Barkwell is coming. That Scotchman has got something on the ball. Others are on the alert, will come immediately if absolutely necessary, will keep in touch. Jonfred insulted me. The damned Austrian wanted to know what the hell existed that three or four of us couldn't handle. He implied I was getting old and feeble, the son-of-a-gun." Bergson chuckled at the accusation. "Schmuzu and Barkwell will be here tomorrow...."

SCHMUZU was short and fat and eternally smiling. Looking at the benevolent yellow mask of his face, you had the impression that nothing

could upset his poise and equanimity.

Barkwell was tall and slender, a dour man with a dour face but possessed of some inner source of strength that did not appear on his features. He was one of the world's experts on nuclear physics, as Schmuzu was one of Earth's authorities on the structure and propogation of force fields.

Bergson met them at the airport, took them to his hotel.

Fear stalked through the town of Newport. For days the telecasts were jammed with news about the death of the students. The university authorities called the best doctors available. The medicos examined and conferred and probed and weighed and came up with the information that they had no information beyond the fact that the men were dead. The beer they had been drinking was analyzed down to the last molecule, with no results.

The Branni did not interfere in any of these activities. They were preparing to conduct their own investigation. Renting space, they set up a small laboratory. The subject they were going to test was quite different from the subjects the doctors had examined.

They were going to examine the brain of a young woman.

Sylvia lay on a bed, with wires attached to a dozen different spots on her skull. Wires tapped both wrists, her neck, her legs, ran to bulky equipment that almost filled the small room they had rented. Jan Martin sat beside her. "Whatever it was that killed those people, you sensed it just as it struck," Bergson explained. "The agency that caused those deaths must therefore have also made an impression on your brain. This is further confirmed by the fact that you fainted. If we can contact that impression, perhaps we can determine something about the agency that killed the students."

He paused, went slowly on. "All ordinary methods of investigation seem to be blocked. We must, therefore, pursue this one." He glanced down at Sylvia. "Afraid, my dear?"

"Of course. But not enough to call a halt."

Bergson smiled at her. "I like that kind of courage. If our investigation becomes painful to you, my dear, will you let us know immediately, so we can stop it?"

"I can take it."

Schmuzu was bending over her, his face a yellow mask. She made a grimace at him. "And as for you, you Yellow Buddha—"

The Jap smiled. "We will be careful with you, my dear, even though a mere woman, in my country, is not regarded as being very valuable."

"Pooh. We are not in your country."

"And I did not say that I shared that opinion," Schmuzu continued.

"You had better not share it," Sylvia said. There might be danger in this investigation, but what of it? If her life was in the hands of these men, she knew of no safer place for it to be. Each one of them would cheerfully die for her, but she alone had to undergo the testing, she alone had sensed the presence of the intruder.

"Are you ready, my dear?"

"Shoot." She closed her eyes.

"Will you recall your impressions when you said, 'It's come in upon us'?"

These were the words she had spoken when the song had ended in screams and men had begun to die.

Watching beside her, Jan saw her pulse pick up as her body began an automatic response to reliving the situation she had experienced before. He knew she was making a journey into fear. His mind went into her mind, giving her strength, courage, and solace. From the impressions floating outward from her mind, he knew she needed the strength he had to give. He gave it freely, willingly. Schmuzu, Bergson, and Barkwell divided their their attention between her and the instruments.

The instruments clicked softly as they recorded what was happening deep within her brain.

AN HOUR later it was finished. Looking a little wan and pale, she was sitting up and drinking coffee while the three scientists were silently consdering the results of their examination. Bergson's face was white again and Schmuzu had lost something of his look of a grinning Buddha. Bergson's thinning hair was twisted in every direction, his shirt had been ripped open at the collar, his face was twisted. Barkwell looked more dour than ever, and more silent. Bergson sank down in a big chair. He looked more dead than anything else. When he spoke his voice seemed to come up from sepulchral depths.

"There is no question that a definite physical entity, of a kind hitherto utterly unknown, caused these deaths. This is also little or no question that it will return."

His words produced a stir in the room. Schmuzu blinked slanted eyes in startled amazement. For an instant, the eternal grin fell away from his face, revealing the human behind it, afraid, bewildered and uncertain in a lonely and lonesome world. Then Schmuzu was grinning again. But it was a forced grin.

"It will return," Bergson continued. "But I think I know how to stop it."

"Yes!" Schmuzu's grin was no longer forced.

"We will need a number of generators capable of generating this specific frequency." Bergson rose to his feet, turned on the equipment which had been used on Sylvia. They clustered around him.

Across an oscilloscope green lines traced themselves in a characteristic weaving pattern. "This is a recording of Sylvia's brain waves," Bergson said. "All life forms vibrate in a characteristic pattern and at a characteristic frequency. There are different patterns for every species and slightly different patterns for every individual within that species. This brain wave pattern is almost as revealing and almost as individual as fingerprints."

He pointed with a pencil at a heavy line showing on the screen. "This dark green line is the frequency and the pattern which Sylvia generates. If you will look closely, you will see that interwoven through and with it is another, much fainter line which is a slightly different shade of green. This fainter line is the radiation flowing from the life-form that appeared here and killed wantonly. Sylvia's brain made a permanent recording of this radiation. We in turn have made a recording of the recording in her brain. This is it."

The pencil clearly indicated a thin green line that waved up and down. "You will note it has a characteristic pattern of ups and downs and that it also has a definite frequency—in this case, higher than that of any other life-form I have ever examined. Actually this life-form is operating and is radiating at a frequency higher than that of visible light." A frown crossed Bergson's face, then was gone.

"To combat this life-form, it will be necessary to generate a frequency that will cancel out the original frequency. It has been repeatedly demonstrated in laboratory experiments that animal life can be destroyed in that manner. There have also been several attempts to use the same device on humans." Bergson's face grew grim. "Something always happened to the men who attempted to use such a device on their fellow men."

He paused and his face grew calm. "Let us hope that in this case a similar result will come about. Otherwise I am of the opinion that this alien life-form will prey upon the human race for centuries to come, perhaps until the race has been so nearly destroyed that the remnants have degenerated to the status of primitives, cave men, bush men, aborigines similar to those of long ago."

Bergson's voice went into slow silence. The picture he sketched in rough outline was a grim one. The room was quiet. Outside in the sky a helocopter beat lazy wings against unmoving air.

"As bad as that?" Schmuzu spoke.

"I'm afraid it is very bad," Bergson answered.

"How shall we proceed?" the Jap continued.

"First, we must make the generators. Then we must wait until the alien life-form comes again."

"But it may come anywhere," Barkwell said slowly. "Asia, South America, Europe. How can we know where it will strike again?"

"Perhaps," Sylvia said slowly. "Perhaps I can help there. I think, if I keep myself continuously alert, I can not only tell when it will strike, but maybe where."

"Good girl," Bergson said, his face glowing.

"I think it will come back here again," Sylvia said. Her face was white with a peculiar ashy pallor on it.

"Syl—" Jan said protestingly.

"I know, there will be risk," she answered. "But—I'll take my chances with the rest of you."

CHAPTER IV

CLOSER...CLOSER...

THE NIGHT was warm, a soft wind was blowing up from the south, bringing with it the fragrance of earth drying in the sun, or bursting buds. A warm spring night. But in spite of the warmth, there was a chill in the air that seemed to penetrate to the marrow of the bones.

"It's cold out here," Dick Carson spoke, for the tenth time. "I'm freezing to death." In the darkness the chattering of his teeth was audible.

"You can go home if you want to," Jan said.

"Huh?" For an instant hope sounded in Dick's voice. "You and Sylvia too, huh? We can all go home?"

"Sorry," Jan said. "We can't."

"I know." Dick sounded bitter. "But why should you two stick your necks out like this? It's not your job." His voice rose, became almost shrill.

"We're human, aren't we?" Jan answered.

"Yes, of course. But that doesn't mean—"

"The people who died were human, weren't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"And we have an obligation to our race, don't we?"

"I know." The trace of a wail crept into Dick's voice. "It's just that I'm scared, I guess. What if this alien life-form should strike us?"

"Then we use the generator you have. If that fails, we die," Jan answered. There was a tone of finality in his words, but if fear was there, it was well covered.

"You don't have to stay, Dick," Sylvia said gently. "We can handle the generator..."

"And if I walked out on your two, I'd call myself a dog all the rest of my life." A growl sounded in Dick Carson's voice. "To hell with that. I'll stick. What's that up there in the sky?"

Far above them, a red light glowed for an instant, then was gone.

"That's Barkwell," Jan answered. "He's got a generator up there in a 'copter, ready to go into action in case the alien life-form comes from that direction or tries to escape that way." He gestured toward the hill to the right. "Bergson is over there. And the Yellow Buddha is drawing strength from his ancestors on the hill opposite us. They're alone. There are three of us here."

"Alone?" At the thought of being alone in his night, Carson shook his head. "I just didn't know—"

"That being a Branni can sometimes be a little difficult?" Jan questioned.

Dick shivered. "Yes. Up until now, I had thought it was all fun, all easy. Sometimes I make mistakes."

"Don't we all? We just try not to make too many of them."

"But what about those people down there?" Dick gestured toward the figures around a big fire in the little

valley below them. "Aren't we making a mistake in letting them stay there?"

Down below them a group of college students were following a tradition centuries old—roasting franks and drinking beer. There was a big group of the picknickers. The yipping protests of girls came up through the spring night. Mingled with this sound was the deeper laughter of men.

"Shouldn't we warn them?" Dick anxiously questioned. "I mean, if Syl is right, and I don't question her—then shouldn't we warn those people?"

"You try it," Jan answered. Anger crept into his voice. "You go down there and tell them that they may all be dead within half an hour. See what happens."

"What'll they do?"

"They'll have you up before the psychos for examination. You'll be lucky if you don't get yourself a free bed in a nuthouse."

"But if I told 'em it might happen, and then it did happen—of course, that wouldn't help them, but other people might believe me."

"They'd believe you, to the extent of believing that you were either partly to blame for the deaths, or for being involved, somehow, in what was obviously a plot. Then the police would demand to know full details. What would you tell them?"

"Why, the truth, of course."

JAN MARTIN'S laugh was harsh. "The truth would get you a cell in a nuthouse for sure. It might take the concentrated effort of half the Branni to get you out again. No, Dick, telling people the truth just doesn't work. Between us, as Branni, there can be something approximating truth, but between us and the uniniated there can only be wary half-truths. And damned little of that."

"I guess you're right—"

"Shhhhh—" The sibiliant whisper from Sylvia stilled all talk.

"What is it?" Jan spoke quickly.

"The alien life-form. I picked up a touch of it."

"Where?"

"Somewhere above us, I think."

"It's coming, then?"

"Y—yes."

Jan Martin's eyes went to the sky. Stars, and as far as his gaze could reach, more stars, until the eye had lost all impression of their number. Stars, and a feeling of awe, of immensity so great it bordered on fear. But swinging between the stars, a single red light that seemed hardly to move.

"How close?" Jan spoke softly.

"Far away as yet but coming closer very rapidly. And Jan—" She clutched at his arm and he felt a shiver pass through her. "It's hungry! I can feel hunger vibrating from it." Her fingers dug into his arm.

"Steady, Syl. Ready with the generator, Dick." His voice was calm and poised. If there was turmoil in him, it did not reach the surface.

"Right, Jan." In the darkness, Dick was instantly busy kneeling beside the small box sitting on the ground. He worked by touch, they had no light and wanted none. Light might attract attention. Dick had practiced so much with the generator that he knew it perfectly. On top of the box was an antennae shaped like a cone. As he touched a switch, a tiny red light sprang into existence on top of the box, an indication that the complex array of balanced force and counter-force fields that had cost Schmuzu and Barkwell and Bergson so much effort was in operation. "Ready, Jan."

"As soon as Syl spots the alien, go into action," Jan said.

"It's coming closer and it is moving very fast," Sylvia whispered. Jan picked up her words, sent them out telepathically to Schmuzu, Bergson, and Barkwell. Instantly questions came back.

"Where—"

"What—"

"When?"

"We don't know yet."

"Tell us as soon as you do know."

"Of course." In that wordless colloquy, Jan could sense a tension rising almost to fear. Out there in the darkness of the night were three lonely men. As sentinels guarding the ramparts of the sky, they stood together against whatever it was that came hungrily in upon them, but they also stood alone, each man to himself, each man facing death in the lonely night.

"Where is it now, Syl?"

"Up there, somewhere." She gestured toward the sky.

THE TALK between Sylvia and Jan was by means of voice. All of her awareness, all of her ability to communicate by telepathy, was concentrated skyward as she groped for something that she sensed was coming in out of the night.

Jan could sense terror rising in her. His arm went around her. She crept to the protection he gave her, buried her head against his chest, closed her eyes. Holding her, he stood looking up. Dick Carson crouched beside them, the generator in his arms.

From the little valley below them came the sound of song...

"For we all came to college
But we didn't come for knowledge,
So we'll raise hell while we're here!"

The sound of the song raised hackles of fear all over Jan's body. On that other night, there had been singing. Now other fools were singing just before they died. Only they weren't fools. They were just young animals tremendously unaware of the dangers of the night.

Jan's eyes searched the sky. Without realizing he was doing it, he was somehow looking for a shape with wings. Old pictures formed in his mind, coming out of childhood books that had pretended to be for amusement but had aroused horror instead, pictures of tremendous bats, shapes with wings. Or were the pictures in his mind coming up from racial memories, sights that men had once seen and had passed on down across the generations through the germ plasm?

Fear is a bat..... Fear is a feeling deep within you urging you to flight....

Sylvia shivered and tried to press closer to Jan's body.

"It's coming.... It's closeer.... Oh Jan..." His ears barely caught the words her lips formed.

"Where?"

"I cannot tell. Up above, somewhere."

He pressed her reassuringly and again his thoughts whispered out to the watching men. Their questions came as a single echo. "Where—"

"We don't know yet."

"Watch closely." That was Bergson speaking. "Make certain we see it before it strikes. Otherwise those people down there—" Bergson's thinking went into silence. It was as if he did not choose to let himself think of what might happen to the group in the valley below them in case they did not detect the danger in time.

"Boom, boom, boom de lay—" came the sound of the song.

"I'm watching," Jan whispered back to Bergson.

"Ar-val de to—" A flash of voiceless thinking came into Jan's mind. Schmuzu, praying in his native tongue, to the gods of his childhood.

"Stand watch and ward over us now...." Barkwell's thinking came as an echo from the sky.

Jan strained his eyes. He knew that Barkwell, Schmuzu, and Bergson were doing the same thing, trying to see what Sylvia sensed. She was their first line of warning, their far-placed sentinel set to guard the ramparts of the night.

She would warn them. The rest was up to them. Bergson had a great deal of confidence in his unique generators. He had tested and re-tested them. Out from the cones would spring an invisible vortex of violent radiation. It would not harm a human being, a man

struck by it would not know he had been touched.

In effect, these generators were death rays with a highly selective action. They had been designed to destroy one thing, and one one thing, an alien life-form, to reach into the middle of a flock of pigeons and kill one black crow without ruffling a feather on a single pigeon.

"Closer....closer..." Sylvia whispered.

"When we catch sight of it, concentrate all generators on it, but don't fire until I give the signal," Bergson's instructions came. "We want to get it in a focus of radiation, then destroy it utterly."

With Bergson's whispered thoughts had come a feeling of exultation, almost of triumph. It was as if this scientist had suddenly become an old dog that had kept watch around the campfires of his tribe for many years, scenting and giving warning and aiding in destroying the creatures that came in out of the night, huge bears, great cats. And now this old dog was triumphantly on the trail again.

Jan could feel the exultation sweeping through Bergson...

Screams ripped the night!

Sylvia gave a little convulsive movement and began to whisper something that Jan could not catch.

JAN'S EYES were fastened on the fire below. It seemed to him that the group of students around that fire were exploding away from each other. A woman screamed. Once. Then no more. A man yelled hoarsely. He did not yell again. Jan caught glimpses of a man trying to run.

Something seemed to reach out and grab him. He was held suspended for an instant, then he collapsed like an empty husky incapable of sound or movement. In that instant during which the man had been held suspended, something seemed to have jerked all life out of him.

Jan saw a woman start to run...

"Jan, it's here!" Bergson's thought was screaming in his mind.

"Where is it?" Schmuzu was echoing.

"I don't see a damned thing!" Dick was screaming. Dick was looking frantically for a target for the lethal beam of the generator but was not finding what he sought.

"Where is it, Jan?" Bergson's thought carried sudden apprehension.

"It's here but I don't know where. I can't see it."

Jan's eyes and ears brought him evidence of the fact that the alien life-form was present. Down below him figures were still trying to run. Outlined against the fire, their bodies were clearly visible. Clear also was the sight of those who did not move, who would never again move of their own free will.

"We've got to find it!" Bergson's thought carried desperate urgency.

"What did you say, Syl?" For the first time Jan became aware that she had been trying to speak to him.

"I said it's invisible," her muted whisper came. "It does not radiate on a frequency our eyes can catch. We can't see it."

"Can't see it?" Horror rose up in Jan Martin. "But if we can't see it, how can we kill it?"

His imagination instantly formed the picture of an invisible shape in the valley below them, something that he could not detect. His eyes told him that men and women were dying as a result of the actions of that invisible life-form, his eyes could not deny him that fateful information but they did not bring him any data as to the nature of the creature doing the killing.

Jan swiftly relayed Sylvia's information to the others.

"Concentrate all generators on the whole area!" Bergson's abrupt order came.

"Get into action, Dick."

Dick was already acting. Out from his generator was sweeping a cone of

invisible radiation. He turned a wretched face toward Jan. "I don't know whether I'm hitting it or not."

"You've hit something!" Jan answered. He had the confused impression of a sudden moment of tension as if the alien life-form had become aware of a source of danger.

And of a new sound, a shrill high wailing rising on the night air.

"You've hit it!" Jan gasped.

"We've touched it!" Bergson's thought came. There was exultation in it, the exultation of an old dog bugling as it came down for the kill.

The wailing grew. The sound made the flesh crawl all over Jan's body. Sylvia clutched him convulsively. The wailing was a shrill screaming burst of sound that seemed to rip apart every nerve ending in the human body. The cry of the banshee, the scream of the damned, the wailing of a fearful ghost, were all mingled in this one sound.

And the sound was coming toward them.

"Dick—"

"I'm doing everything I can."

The sound was coming closer. Coming up the hillside toward them, it was like a whirlwind blowing at treetop level. Jan caught a glimpse of the tree limbs dancing where no wind was blowing. He felt his heart pound madly, knew that Sylvia's fingers were digging into his arms.

"Jan! Look out!" Bergson's thought cut across his mind.

"Please be aware..." Schmuzu's thinking followed Bergson.

"What can we do?" He knew the answer even before he asked the question. He knew there was nothing he could do. He was caught in the grip of cosmic forces, in a spot where titanic energies were being unleashed.

The whirlwind moved nearer.

The wild wailing grew stronger.

Jan saw Dick run to an opening in the trees, focus the generator upward toward the spot where the branches were being jerked about.

The wailing grew to a scream.

Then ended.

Jan could not see what had happened. The whirlwind was gone. The screaming had stopped. The limbs of the trees had stopped shaking. Sylvia had left off clutching his arms. Dick was stumbling toward them.

Bergson, Schmuzu, and Barkwell were snapping thoughts across his mind.

"It's gone," Sylvia whispered.

"We destroyed it!" Bergson shouted in Jan's mind. The old hound was exulting now. The fires of his people had been protected and defended.

Victory!

The night that had been filled with horror was suddenly again a warm spring night with a soft wind blowing up from the south.

"It's gone," Dick was whispering. "It's finished. It's done."

"Come away," Bergson was ordering. "Come away."

They obeyed him. Later, they gathered in his hotel suite. There was no celebration. But the knowledge that the life-form that had come in out of space had been vanquished was a glow on their faces.

One by one, they went to their own quarters to rest. In a few days they would go quietly away, until another call for help came from some other source.

CHAPTER V

A HUNDREDTH PART

OUT IN space, Melancius figuratively pulled tattered and torn feathers back into place. At the moment of his feeding on the planet below, a very strange and totally unexpected thing had happened to him. Terrific bursts of energy had suddenly been focused on him. He had been hurt as he had not been hurt in

eons. Definite damage had been done to the nebulous network of interwoven vibration levels that were his body.

As he began the process of repairing that damage, he realized that he had made a mistake.

The race on this planet had advanced farther than he had at first thought. They had advanced far enough to become aware of his existence—not in itself too incredible a feat—but they had also advanced far enough to devise a weapon that would harm him.

This was very serious.

It was so serious that action had to be taken. Recalling his memories of what had happened to him, he realized that only a small group had attacked him. And of that group, one individual—and only one individual—had been fully aware of him.

Melancius had no trouble whatsoever in making up his mind. He knew instantly what he was going to do. These feeding grounds were too rich to be abandoned without a fight.

On figurative pinions, Melancius moved in again toward the surface of Earth....

In the quietness of the late night, Bergson slept. He was an old man and he slept curled up in a ball like a child. His breathing was even and gentle.

Near him, the window was open. From outside came a sort of a hushed expectancy as if the night dreamed too. The scream of sirens going to and from the hill country outside of town had long since died into silence.

Softly, gently, the wind blew through the window. Although the night was warm, the wind was cool. On the bed Bergson twisted, stretched himself full length, rolled over on his back. A soft snore came from him.

Suddenly he caught his breath. He bent his body like a bow, a cry came from his lips. For a split second, he seemed to be fighting a nightmare, a distorted creature of wild dreams and wilder fears. He rolled, twisted, tumbled, his face grew purple, he threshed with his arms.

He sighed, relaxed, and was silent.

The covers of the bed were a little tumbled, a litle tossed. Bergson lay without moving.

The biggest change a closer observer might have noticed would have been in the sound of his breathing.

He no longer breathed softly and gently.

He no longer breathed at all.

A cold wind seemed to move out of the window, out into the warm night....

SCHMUZU slept like a placid yellow corpse, utterly naked, his hands folded across his chest, a wooden pillow supporting his head. He snored lustily, his cheeks puffing out with exhalation, and his face was the color of a yellow Buddha. The sound that came from his lips was a cross between the groan of a distant sawmill and the slow grunt of a bullfrog trying to make up its mind whether to croak or to jump into the mill pond.

The room in which he slept was heavy with incense. Sticks of incense still smouldered in front of the idol set upon the dresser across the room. Schmuzu was utterly without superstition, yet who could tell for certain what beneficial results might come from burning incense in front of an idol? Who could tell for certain when the ancestral spirits might feel inclined to help, if properly summoned and propriated.

The ancestors had known many things, had faced many dangers, had braved the world and the forces thereof, including the *elflu*, the evil spirits of the night.

Possibly no good could come of these things, but incense cost very little.

With the smell of it in the air, a son of Japan who had wandered far from his homeland and had become a Brann might know the security of restful,

serene sleep.

The incense swirled in the room as something came through the window and disturbed the air.

Schmuzu died as he slept, in peaceful serenity. As his snoring came to a halt, he did not move a muscle.

His hands across his chest, Schmuzu looked exactly like what he was—a yellow corpse....

Barkwell must have caught some inkling of what was coming. He was out of his room, his night shirt tails flying, and was frantically signalling for the elevator when something caught him.

He fell across the sand-filled stone urn that was used as a receptacle for cigrette butts. He was still moving, though very feebly, when the elevator operator found him.

A hastily summoned doctor pronounced him dead.

The elevator operator, when asked to describe the circumstances under which he had found this guest, reported that something had seemed to be present in the hall. "A kind of a chilly wind," the operator had said.

"Did you see or hear anything?" he was asked.

"No." The operator shivered at the memory of that cold wind.

"Heart failure," the doctor decided.

IN THE SOFTNESS of the quiet night. Sylvia was half awake and half asleep. She could have used a technique known to her to have made herself sleep but this technique she preferred to reserve for other times. Sleep should come naturally, easily, quietly, slipping in upon the awareness like a gentle soothing breeze. Out of some old book of poetry words came into her mind.

"To Sweet Mary praise be given
Who sent the blessed sleep from Heaven
That slid into my soul....."

Coleridge... A poet... And one of the Branni of the old time.

Beside her, she could sense that Jan was sleeping. His sleep had the labored sound of utter exhaustion. Across the room on the couch Dick Carson twisted and turned. Dick, with the shuddering effects of his experience of the night still heavy upon him, had insisted on coming home with them. He had wanted a place to spend the night where he could be with friends. They had willingly consented to his coming. He had brought Bergson's generator with him, hugging it in his arms as if it were his most precious possession. The generator was on the coffee table in front of the couch, within easy reach of Dick's hand. He would have taken it to bed with him if he could have found room for it on the couch.

Dick was taking no chances with invisible forces strong enough to whip tree limbs into a frenzied dance but which he could not see, forces strong enough to slaughter humans in the night.

Sylvia composed herself to sleep. Slowly sleep came. It was a restless sleep in which nightmares came and went. One of the nightmares had to do with a call for help, a call which ended before she had a chance to answer it. There was another nightmare of the same kind, then another. After that there were no more nightmares, but she was restless.

Suddenly cold sweat was pouring over her and she was wide awake.

It was here!

She was aware that the alien life-form was coming through the window of the room, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what its purpose was.

In that split second that went with awakening, she recognized the source of her nightmares. As they died, Bergson, Schmuzu, and Barkwell had called for help. Their calls had reached her mind but not sufficiently to awaken her.

The alien life-form had killed them.

Her scream tore the night.

(*please turn to page* 116)

THE SUBVERSIVE

by ALFRED COPPEL

A salesman's paradise, that's what AD-10 was. Because Golden knew these supermen were going to be crazy about General Cereals....

THE CUSTOMS officer was tall —over six feet—and darkly handsome. He was courteous and efficient and very handy with the Spy.

Golden watched the register of the muttering instrument with uneasiness. He had been warned that the Alpha Draconis 10 customs were thorough, and now, standing on the spaceport ramp among the milling crowd that had been disgorged by the towering starship, he could believe it. The officer used the Spy on his two battered suitcases and his trunk with meticulous care. Not that Golden's order books or samples could be in any way incriminating—not here, in the restricted area.

"Would you care to make a declaration of intention?" the black-uniformed superman asked cordially.



Golden swallowed hard and nodded tentatively. "I...ah...intend to take my option to leave the restricted area."

The officer's eyebrows arched. "Indeed?" He scrutinized Golden very carefully. "You must be a new type, then. I didn't know Earth Government had lifted the breeding prohibition."

Golden's mouth felt dry. What a man won't do, he thought bleakly, to make a dollar! "They haven't. But a few of us are still employed—as traveling men mostly. In the Outer Systems. Like here... Alpha Draconis...." He felt the officer's half-amused hostility and realized that he was talking too much.

"You will have no objection, then, to a routine check? It is required for anyone leaving the restricted area—but of course if you have been here before, you know all about that," the officer said.

Golden felt a wave of cold shivers march down his spine. He had been warned about this, too, and he had expected it. But not so soon. He licked his lips and nodded.

"Come with me, please."

Golden followed the black-clad superman into a small room. He could feel himself beginning to wheeze asthmatically and he thought longingly of the antihistamines he'd had to leave at home. To bring them would have been out of the question, no matter what the possible discomforts. There were no allergies on AD-10. No ailments of *any* kind.

The room in which he found himself was an X-ray hut. The sales manager had warned him of this, but the reality of it was frightening.

"Step over there, if you please," the officer indicated the business end of the complicated camera. "We won't detain you long."

Golden stepped in front of the tube and waited, a cold sweat oozing down his fat back.

The machine hummed slightly and clicked. The officer withdrew a plate and held it up to the light.

"Apparently in order," he said softly.

Golden began to breathe again. General Cereals was a first class company, and of course nothing would be left to chance to insure the safety of the organization's best travelling man, but all the same it was good to see that the syntho had been well done. The customs officer seemed satisfied, at least. Golden let himself grin slightly as he thought of the vast, untouched market beyond the restricted area. Even the supermen of AD-10 had to eat—and they might just as well eat General Cereals.

"Am I free to go?" he asked the officer.

"IN A MOMENT." A teleray buzzed and a black uniformed image solldified in the room. A desk covered with communicators half-materialized, too. The customs man held the X-ray plate before the image.

"Another one?" asked the wraith.

"Looks like it. Good job, though. You better get down here and handle this yourself."

The wraith nodded and the teleray image faded. Golden felt the beginnings of new fear. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Please sit down, Mr. Golden," the officer said coldly, "My superior will be here in a moment to explain things to you."

Golden felt panic. He opened his mouth to command his instant release, but nothing came out. He had forgotten the suppressor that blanketed the restricted area of the spaceport. He could not phrase a direct command.

Golden sank down onto the low bench that lined one wall. He had muffed it somehow. The syntho had been good, but not good enough. His could feel the unnatural throb of the two hearts in his chest and his breath was becoming shorter and shorter, wheezing in his throat. He was suddenly terrified. The stories that reached Earth about men trying to break out of the restricted area on AD-10 all came back to him in a rush, and with them something akin to panic.

"Look," he said shakily, "I'm only a traveling salesman. "I'm no Hitler—honestly! Listen to me, will you? All I wanted to do was sell some cereals, see? Nothing else—"

The black garbed officer looked at him bleakly.

Golden looked away. There was an icy hate In the metallic eyes.

Presently the wraith appeared, but this time in the flesh. He too, was six feet tall and as perfectly made as his subordinate. "This," he said disdainfully glancing at Golden, "is the human?" The other nodded.

"G...Golden's the name. Golden of General Cereals, Inc. of Altoona, Pennsylvania sir," Golden stammered.

"Why did you attempt to disguise yourself?"

"I only wanted to get out of the restricted area, so—"

"Our laws forbid humans outside the restricted area. All visitors know that."

"Yes, but all I wanted to do was sell—"

"You had a synthosurgical conversion. That is a great deal of trouble to go to simply to sell cereals."

"Yes, but—"

(*please turn to page 40*)

STAR-WIFE

by MORTON KLASS

THE SPACEGRAM had said:

6/24/2127 S.S PRESIDENT WANA-KA

ENROUTE PROCYON IV—SOL III

DEAR MOM AND DAD:

ARRIVING EARTH NOVEMBER FIRST. MARRIED. MEET US AT SPACEPORT.

LARRY

"But there are no *women* on Procyon IV!" Mom wailed when she read the spacegram.

"Now, Agnes," Dad said, taking the message out of her fingers and trying to read lines that weren't there, "no point in getting all upset. If Larry's married, there must have been a girl! Probably the daughter of some other plantation manager."

Mom clutched her hands to her

Vhantha was unquestionaby the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, but my brother Larry should have realized that she wasn't human, after all



breast and sat down hard in one of the kitchen chairs. "John," she gasped, "you know Larry's written us time and time again that plantation managers aren't permitted to bring their families with them! *Who* can he have married?"

Mom was right, of course. Dad tried not to show it, but as the months went by and we waited for my brother Larry and his new wife to arrive, I could see he was worrying, too.

On the morning of November first, I banked the family 'copter in over Nevada Field, and shot a quick glance into the rear seat. Mom and Dad were holding hands and both their faces were pretty pale.

"Maybe she's a castaway," I said.

Aunt Bess, sitting next to me up front, sniffed loudly.

Dad frowned.

"You've been reading too many of those crazy space adventures, Tom. That kind of talk isn't helping your mother any. You'd better turn around and mind your driving."

I shrugged, and concentrated on the controls. There wasn't much for me to do: the 'copter was practically completely automatic like everything else these days. You have to be a graduate combustion engineer even to know how to open the motor casing. The ground beam took over, pulling us into an empty parking space, and I relaxed.

Attendants directed us to the oversized waiting room. When we got there we read the big ceiling, "Arrivals and Departures", and found out that Larry's ship, the *President Wanaka*, was going to be two hours late, so we settled down to wait.

Mom sat down on a padded bench and pulled the rumpled spacegram out of her Venus-leather handbag to see if maybe the words had changed since the last time she had read it. Dad paced the floor in front of her, chain smoking. I grabbed a seat off to one side, and watched Aunt Bess stare disapprovingly out of the big window at all the docked spaceships.

Aunt Bess always said it wasn't fittin' for people to leave their native world and go traipsing around space. When Larry got the job with Interstellar Fruit, three years ago and announced he was going off to Procyon IV to manage a *lhuhanha* plantation, Aunt Bess raised a yell that could be heard to Canopus. I was only fifteen then, but I remember all the excitement in the family. Dad said she was just an old maid with no family of her own, always mixing into other people's affairs. Mom said that was a nice thing to say about her own sister, and there was a big fight.

LARRY WENT, of course. He'd planned on going since we were both so high, reading space adventures together late at night, flashlights under the blankets. In those days we both intended to be jet engineers, but Larry had to junk that dream when he flunked his "Fourteen-Year-Old Comprehensive Engineering Aptitude"—just as I did, later on—and alm instead for a plantation managership.

Funny, how differently things worked out from the way they figured it in the old anthologies. I don't mean all their warpy ideas about ship propulsion or alien life, but the ways they described life in the Age of Space Travel. What always made me laugh was the way the old masters imagined we'd all be leaping in and out of spaceships, welding busbars, and whatnot. Trouble is, science became so complex that only the top brains could cope with it. The rest of us just use the stuff they turn out, without having the vaguest idea of the principles at work.

Then 'copters came along and turned the world into a mess of small towns. My own Dad is just an ordinary grocer, and the only difference between him and his twentieth-century counterpart is that Dad stocks things like *lhuhanha* fruit and Martian fig-apples. And I'll bet none of the old boys thought there'd be someone like Aunt Bess, crocheting and turning her nose up at spaceships, in the twenty-second century!!

She took a fig-apple out of her work-basket, broke off a section, and began chewing primly. "Always said no good would come of this," she said darkly, to nobody in particular.

Mom jumped as if she were bitten, and Dad sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulder. Aunt Bess picked up her crochet-work, looking smug. She lived for the times she could say, "I told you so."

I knew what the three of them were thinking, even though they were trying to hide it from me. They were afraid Larry had taken up with some saloon-girl he'd met in one of the entertainment dives of Procyon IV. They hadn't even told any of the neighbors back in Pember's Falls that Larry was married. Just said he was coming home, and shut up.

Time trickled by and I was beginning to doze a little, when there was a blinding flash, and the floor vibrated under our feet. Aunt Bess shrieked and came upright, spilling her work-basket. Everyone in the waiting-room crowded around the windows and we watched a big freighter being eased into dock by a swarm of tiny tug-planes. The ship's hull was covered with big blotches of space-rust. We could barely make out the name, *President Wanaka,* on the side facing us.

The loudspeaker overhead squawked into life and the excited babble quieted down.

"Attention please! Visitors are not permitted on the field! Passengers must go through Customs, Immigration Service, and Health Inspection. They will join you in the waiting room as soon as they are through. Please do not walk out onto the field! Thank you!"

A FEW PEOPLE complained loudly, after the loudspeaker clicked off, but it was mainly for showing off purposes—everyone knows that the hull radiation of a ship just in from space can be dangerous.

We all settled back to wait. At first, every time the inner door of the waiting room swung open, Mom and Dad would leap to their feet. But each time it was a stranger who entered, to be greeted joyfully by friends and family. After about an hour, the four of us were the only ones left in the cavernous waiting room.

We were all becoming a little nervous at the delay. Aunt Bess kept ripping the work she'd done and starting over again. I heard Dad whisper urgently to Mom, "Remember, Agnes, she's our daughter-in-law. We mustn't hurt Larry—"

He broke off suddenly. The door swung open and Larry came through, weighted down with baggage.

There was a figure behind him in the dimness, but our eyes were on Larry. He'd changed a lot in the three years. His body was thin and stronger-looking than it had been before he had left, and his face was deeply tanned. We all stood fixed for a moment, then Larry dropped his luggage and ran toward us, grinning.

"Mom! Dad! Tommy! Aunt Bess! It's great to be back."

I pummelled Larry's back, Dad held his hand and said, "Well, well," in a choked voice, and Mom threw her arms around his neck and cried.

Larry picked Mom up and whirled her around. "How's my girl?" he said, laughing. Then he put her down, suddenly. "Hey, that reminds me!" He turned and raced to the figure in the doorway.

He led her forward into the light.

"Meet Vhantha, my wife, folks," he said proudly. "Vhantha, this is my family. I've told you all about them."

I heard Dad gasp behind me, and I guess my own jaw must have dropped. Vhantha was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, *but she wasn't human!*

Not Earth-human, anyway. She was average height, but her skin was a rich, golden color. Not yellow, or orange, but *burnished gold!* The pupils

of her eyes were gold, too, and they reflected back the lights of the room. Her full, red lips parted in a heart-breakingly unsure smile, and revealed perfect, white teeth.

She wore a simple, green frock that set off the soft curves of her body, but that also contrasted startlingly against her golden skin.

Vhantha was obviously frightened, and the rest of us were stunned, but Larry was determined to behave as if it were the most normal situation in the world. Holding her arm, he propelled her forcibly up to each one of us.

"This is Mom, and Dad, and this is the kid brother, Tommy. Aunt Bess, meet your new niece, Vhantha!"

Aunt Bess had been clutching the back of one of the benches for support, but when Larry spoke to her she straightened up stiffly and extended a hand to Vhantha.

"How do you do?" Aunt Bess said, in a completely toneless voice.

Vhantha looked at the hand, looked up at Larry, then put her own hand out uncertainly.

Aunt Bess started to shake the proffered hand, screamed piercingly, and collapsed to the floor in a dead faint.

Vhantha's delicately moulded, golden hand had two thumbs, the second one where the little finger should be!

THE TRIP back to Pember's Falls was pretty damned uncomfortable. Larry and Vhantha sat up front with me, and I did my best to cut through the tenseness by pointing out the sights to Vhantha. She exclaimed ecstatically over the Grand Canyon, way to the south of us. Her English was perfect, but she had a funny way of aspirating each vowel. Not unpleasant, just different. Even Larry commented enthusiastically on the sunset forming majestically behind the Sierras.

But Mom, Dad, and Aunt Bess sat breathing heavily in the back seat, never uttering a word.

It was getting dark when I dropped the 'copter into the yard back of our house. Mom offered to put Larry and Vhantha up for the night, but she seemed a little relieved when Larry said they planned to stay at the hotel until they could get a house of their own. She did insist, though, that they have supper at our house that night. She looked questioningly at Vhantha, as if unsure how to phrase the problem in her mind.

"Vhantha eats all normal foods," Larry said evenly, and Mom turned red and hurried into the house, followed closely by Aunt Bess.

Dad opened and closed his mouth a few times, and then said, "Well, see you folks later."

I decided to land the 'copter on the hotel's roof garage, rather than the street, to avoid difficulties. There was a little stickiness when Larry and Vhantha registered, but finally the three of us were sitting in the tiny parlor of Larry's hotel suite.

There was an oppressive silence for a while. Larry broke it by calling room service and asking to have a bottle sent up. He covered the screen with his palm and looked at me.

"Is it all right for you to have a drink?" he asked.

"I'm a big boy now," I told him.

Larry grinned. "And three glasses," he told the clerk's face, and clicked off.

I watched Vhantha. She was unpacking two of the suitcases, neatly placing some of her and Larry's clothes in the old-fashioned hotel dresser. It was obvious that the events of the past few hours had disturbed her deeply, but she was making a valiant effort not to show it. She smiled every time she came by me, softly humming a pleasant, if unrecognizable, tune, and her golden body moved with an easy grace that brought a lump to my throat.

Larry strode over to her and put his arm around her waist. He led her to the couch, saying gently, "Time enough for that later on. Let's all get acquainted, now."

He looked at me and, when he was

sure Vhantha couldn't see his face, his expression changed. His eyes said, "Don't *you* fail me," but he really didn't have to worry.

"Vhantha," I said, relaxing back into my chair, "it's an honor to have you in the family. Believe me, the family doesn't deserve it."

It wasn't much of a crack, but it seemed to clear the air.

Vhantha came over and kissed me lightly. "Thanks, Tommy," she said softly. "Larry was right. You're the nicest brother-in-law a girl could want."

I gulped, and I must have blushed a little, because they both laughed as Vhantha sat down next to Larry again.

"Don't worry about the family," I told them, trying to sound as if I were really sure of what I was saying. "They'll come around. It's just that they always have trouble getting used to someone new."

LARRY'S face became troubled. "Wish I could be sure of that, Tommy. Frankly, I didn't expect that kind of reaction."

He ran his fingers through his hair and pulled Vhantha's head down on his shoulder.

"Oh, I knew Mom and Dad would be surprised, of course, but, well—You see, on Matilda—"

"Who's Matilda?" I interrupted, confused.

"Procyon IV. Named after the discoverer's mother. After you've lived there awhile, it gets to feeling like home and you can't think of it as just a numeral in space. It's a beautiful planet, with most of the land area in the sub-tropical zones."

I leaned forward excitedly. This was what I wanted to hear! The *real* story of life on another planet!

"The *onhetha*—Vhantha's people—sort of set off the mood of Matilda," Larry went on. "They're a little behind Earth technically, but psychologists have proven they have the same intelligence level. A placid people, enjoying day-to-day existence to the fullest, and the earthmen tend to imitate them after a time. Intermarriage is accepted pretty much casually there, even though it doesn't seem to lead to children. It seems we're too different internally."

I swallowed. This would be a further blow to Mom, who had dreams of grandchildren.

"You'd like the girls out there, Tom. I married the prettiest one—" he grinned down at Vhantha, "but—there are lots more. And nobody works too hard on Matilda. When the company offered me a job on Earth, handling *lhuhanha* distribution in this state, I couldn't make up my mind whether I really wanted to come back or not. But Vhantha had just agreed to marry me, and I thought it would be nice to see the folks again—"

A rap sounded at the door. I jumped to my feet, but Larry got there first.

"Your drinks, Sir," the bellhop said. He noticed Vhantha and looked startled. Larry slapped a coin into his hand and shoved him out.

We had a couple of drinks and talked some more. Larry told me about his new job, and how he planned to buy a little house in town. I told about school and all the news of Pember's Falls for the past three years, which wasn't much. Vhantha listened, putting in a word now and then. It was nice.

Suddenly, Larry looked at his watch and jumped to his feet.

"Hey," he said, "supper's waiting, and so is the family. We'd better get a move on! Give me a second to change my shirt."

He disappeared into the bedroom.

Vhantha came up to me and took my hands. Urgency radiated from her golden eyes.

"Tommy," she whispered, "Larry's trying not to show it, but he's afraid. So am I. If his own mother and father acted that way, how are the rest of the people going to behave? You're the only friend we have. It's going to

he hard for you, too, but please stick with us!"

I closed my fingers over her cool, two-thumbed hands.

"You didn't have to ask, Vhantha," I whispered hack. "I'm on your side. remember?"

THERE WAS a clatter at the door again. I opened it, with Vhantha standing hehind me. Sam Drewberry. reporter for the Pemher's Falls *Sentinel,* stood in the doorway chewing a pencil. He'd heen in Larry's class in school.

"Hi. Tom," he said. "Hear your hrother just got in from Procyon IV. The desk clerk was a little excited, and I couldn't make head or tail of what he was trying to tell me. What's this about Larry bringing some kind of monster home from—"

He noticed Vhantha, then, and did a douhle take.

This time, I did the shoving.

Larry walked back into the room struggling into a tie.

"Somehody at the door?" he wanted to know.

"Nothing important," I told him, avoiding Vhantha's eyes. "Let's get going, if you're ready."

Supper was about as painful as I'd expected, what with Aunt Bess shuddering visibly every time Vhantha lifted a spoon to her mouth. The poor kid was becoming self-conscious about it, too, and that just made her movements awkward. Dad made heavy conversation about how he, Larry, and I would go hunting and fishing together, just as we did in the old days.

Mom seemed to have come to a decision before we arrived, and behaved almost naturally toward Vhantha. Once she and Larry were settled in their new home, Mom told her, Mom would invite her down to one of her sewing circle meetings, where Vhantha could get acquainted with the women of the town.

"You do sew, don't you?" Mom asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes," Vhantha told her, pathetically grateful.

Larry bought a tiny house about three hlocks away from ours, and for the next three days I didn't see too much of either of them. Larry was busy getting squared away at his new job, and Vhantha knocked herself out getting her new home in order. Mom dropped over occasionally to give her a hand, and even showed her how to broil steaks the way Larry liked them. It really hegan to look as if things might work out, after all.

I came back from school on the fourth day to find the house in an uproar. Mom and Vhantha were sitting in chairs on opposite sides of the kitchen, crying. I noticed that Vhantha's left wrist was bandaged.

Dad and Larry, both of them apparently hurriedly arrived from work, were standing behind their wives, trying to calm them down and find out what happened. I dropped my hooks near the door. No one even noticed me come in.

"Now, Agnes," Dad said helplessly, "it can't be as bad as all that!"

"I was never so humiliated!" Mom wailed.

Vhantha looked up and tried to control her sobs.

"I—I was just trying to hide my other thumbs," she said in a tiny voice. "I know they make people uncomfortahle. The cup slipped..."

She buried her face in her hands and Larry put an arm protectively around her heaving shoulders.

The story came out in sections. Put together, it appeared that Mom had decided not to put off Vhantha's introduction to the women of Pemher's Falls any longer, and had invited her down to a gathering at our house that afternoon. The women thawed after an hour or so—it was hard not to, around Vhantha—and everyone became pretty chummy. Then Vhantha cut her wrist on the broken cup and bled slightly.

Larry explained to me later that

her blood was more or less like ours, just smaller hemoglobin, or something. Anyway, it came out sort of watery and more pink than red. Some of the women got upset, old Mrs. Ingram threw up on the rug, and Aunt Bess of course had hysterics. All in all, it was pretty awful.

"Oh, why did this have to happen to us?" Mom moaned. "Mrs. Fremont said my son was married to a monster, and—"

"Don't use that word!" Larry barked.

Dad looked at Larry reprovingly. "Larry, she's your mother..."

"And Vhantha's my wife!"

He yanked Vhantha to her feet roughly and pulled her out through the back door before anyone could say a word.

MOM CRIED some more, and finally Dad and I got her up to her room. She stayed in bed with a sick headache for two days. I suppose she was afraid to face the other women.

Word got around the town about Vhantha after that, and the word was "monster". I had fights with a couple of the fellows at school when I heard them nsing the word, and knocked out two of Jimmy Watson's front teeth when he came up to me between classes and leered, "Hey, Tom! Is it true what they say about the 'monster'? I've heard she—" He whispered into my ear, and I hit him.

The principal, Mr. Brennan, called me down to his office and gave me a long lecture about how rowdyism was hurting my record, and in my last year, too.

I came out of school feeling the hopelessness of the whole thing. You can't fight an entire town. Larry wouldn't let anyone except me come down to see him and Vhantha, but Mom and Dad were putting on a show of loyalty and it was hurting them among their friends. Even Dad's business was affected.

Some of the town's more irresponsible elements were muttering about a "tar and feathering party." The *Sentinel* had run a short squib by Sam Drewberry, the day after Larry's and Vhantha's arrival. It had reported tonelessly that "Lawrence Adams, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Adams, of this community, arrived yesterday from Procyon IV. He brought with him his wife, formerly a native of that planet. They will reside..." Since then, the *Sentinel* had been disturbingly silent for a small-town paper.

"Tommy!"

I looked up, startled. Vhantha very rarely left the house these days. She was standing just outside the high school yard. Her hands were in the pockets of her coat, a habit she'd gotten into whenever she did go out, but it didn't make much difference. Her golden skin shone in the bright sunlight and the people who walked by ignored her pointedly. A crowd of small children had gathered near her, giggling and pointing.

I walked over to her scowling at the children. They scattered.

"Tommy!" she said, "I'm glad I caught you. Larry called up and said he had a rush of work to do and that he wouldn't be home till late. I—I don't like to sit around the house all by myself. I thought... Would you want to come over for supper?"

"Sure thing," I told her. I dropped into a phone booth and called up home to say I wouldn't be there for supper.

Vhantha was a terrific cook. She had a way of preparing the most commonplace things so that they'd taste as if you'd never eaten them before.

After supper, we sat around in the living room and Vhantha showed me pictures of Matilda. I guess she was homesick, and you couldn't blame her. She talked about her people, and their history, and the big open-air festivals they had. After a while, she got a faraway look in her eyes and started singing a song. I couldn't understand

the words, of course, but it sounded like something she'd learned when she was a little girl.

She made jokes, and tried to behave as if she were perfectly happy, but I could see she had something on her mind. I was afraid it was Larry, and I turned out to be right.

"Tommy," she said suddenly, "I'm worried about Larry. He's changed so in the past few days. I'm afraid it's hitting him hardest. After all, these people were all once his friends. He just sits around the house, brooding. If it goes on much longer, I don't know what he'll do. Do you—do you think the town will get over its feelings, and—and stop acting the way it does?"

I WAS FRAMING some reassuring fiction when the front doorbell rang. Vhantha jumped up and ran to the door. I followed her.

When she opened the door, Larry stumbled in, almost falling. His hair was disarrayed and his face was flushed. I'd never seen him this way before, but I recognized the symptoms.

"Larry!" Vhantha cried. "What's the matter? Are you sick?"

I caught hold of Larry's arm and steered him into the house.

"It's nothing, Vhantha," I told her. "Larry must have had a couple of drinks with some of the boys. He's a little drunk, that's all."

"Vhantha," Larry mumbled brokenly, "love you, baby. Don' worry, Vhantha, things'll work out. Larry loves you."

Between us, we got him upstairs and into bed. I had to be getting home, and Vhantha showed me to the door, strain evident around her golden eyes.

"There's no point in getting upset, Vhantha," I told her. "A fellow begins to feel things are getting out of hand and has himself a couple of drinks. Larry's no fool. By tomorrow he'll have realized this hasn't solved anything. I doubt if it'll happen again."

Vhantha nodded dumbly and I walked off. I didn't look back. I was pretty sure I hadn't fooled Vhantha, and I knew I hadn't fooled myself.

When I arrived home after school the next day the house was empty. Mom had left a note saying Dad was keeping his store open a little later tonight, and she was going down to keep him company.

I took some milk from the refrigerator and cut myself a large hunk of cake, thinking about Mom and Dad. They were quiet these days, always staying close together as if they were terribly afraid of something and the only security each had was the other's presence. It was hard for them, and it was even harder for Larry and Vhantha. It was a rotten world, and there was nothing I could do except stand on the sidelines and watch helplessly.

The telephone buzzed.

I walked into the hall, carrying the cake, and clicked the screen on. Vhantha's face appeared. I'd never seen her looking so upset before. She was crying, and she started talking, half-hysterically, as soon as she recognized me.

"Tommy! I'm glad it's you! Larry hasn't come home, or called, or anything! I called his office, and they told me he'd been fired! Oh, Tommy! It's all my fault, I know it! I'm ruining Larry's life!"

"Vhantha!" I shouted at her. "Try to get a grip on yourself! Look: I'll go into town and find Larry. He's probably wandering around town trying to figure out how to come home and break the news to you. I'll bring him home, but you don't want him to see you like that."

She really made an effort to swallow her sobs.

"Thanks, Tommy." She smiled at me. "For everything. I wish I had some of your strength." The screen blanked and I tore out of the house.

IT TOOK me about an hour to find Larry. I tried the town's small park first, thinking he might be sitting there trying to work things out, but the benches were filled with the usual crowd of young couples and there was no sign of Larry. Finally, I went down South Street, peering into all the bars.

I almost missed Larry. He was sitting in the dimness at a small table way in the back of a saloon. There was a glass in front of him and, for a moment, I was afraid he was drunk again, but as I approached his table I noticed the drink hadn't been touched.

He looked up when I stepped in front of him, somehow not at all surprised to see me there.

"Hello, Tommy," he said, then looked down at the drink before him and shook his head, smiling slightly.

"No, I'm not drunk. I came here for that, but there really isn't much point to it. Besides, yesterday's foolishness caused enough trouble."

I sat down in an empty chair. "What happened, Larry?"

He shrugged. "When I got to the office this morning the District Manager was waiting for me. Seems somebody had wired the main office about my damfool act last night, and the manager flew right into Pember's Falls. The only way I can figure it is that the Fruit Company was waiting for me to make the least slip. He bumbled about my good record on Matilda, and all that, but wound up with the business of how the company couldn't afford to have its representatives injuring its prestige. He offered to let me finish up the month."

"You mean they fired you because of one little thing like that?"

"Oh, it was more than that, of course. I had a sort of quiet pressure put on me back on Matilda, when I was preparing to marry Vhantha. The company didn't like it there, but they liked it even less on Earth. They take all the noise our marriage has raised as a reflection on the company. The manager didn't mention Vhantha, but I could feel she was the real issue. I told him what he could do with the rest of the month, and walked out. Now I've got to tell Vhantha."

"She knows, Larry."

That startled him. "How did she find out?" he asked, alarm in his voice.

"She tried to reach you at the office, and they told her. You'd better go home. She's pretty upset."

Larry nodded and stood up, flipping a coin on the table.

"Larry!" I burst out, when we reached the street. "Why don't you and Vhantha go back to Matilda? It's never going to work out here. That's her home, and the two of you could be happy—"

He looked at me queerly and I broke off.

"I thought of it, Tommy. Lots of times. What would I do there? The company wouldn't give me my old job back. They don't like married plantation managers. Live with Vhantha's people? It's a thought, but the main trouble is we don't have the fare to Procyon. It's pretty expensive when you're not working for the company. No, Tommy, I guess we'll just have to work things out here."

I didn't see how, but I nodded and we walked the rest of the way to Larry's house in silence.

THERE WAS a light shining from the front room and I felt a lot better. I hadn't wanted to say anything to Larry, but all the way home I'd been thinking about Vhantha, sitting all alone in the house for hours, waiting for Larry to come home, and I'd been worried.

Larry looked a little relieved, too. He went up the front steps two at a time, pulling out his keys. The door opened before he could unlock it, and Vhantha stood there, looking excited.

"Larry!" she cried, throwing her

arms around his neck, "I was so worried about you!"

Then she said in a low whisper, "Both of you. Come in and keep quiet. Whatever I say, just agree with me. There's a man here. . . ."

She led us into the living room. A tall, middle-aged stranger who had been sitting on the couch, stood up as we came in. He was holding a notebook.

Vhantha, smiling brightly at everyone, said, "Mr. Stone, this is my husband, Larry Adams, and my brother-in-law, Tom Adams. Larry, Mr. Stone is with Amalgamated Press. He's come all the way here from Frisco to interview me. His copter's in the backyard."

The newspaperman shook hands gravely with Larry and me. He said, "Sorry to bust in on you like this without an invitation, Mr. Adams, but we've just gotten wind of what's been happening out here in Pember's Falls. Do you mind if I continue with the interview?"

I've never seen my brother look more confused. He shook his head in a bewildered fashion, and we all sat down.

"Now, Mrs. Adams," the reporter said, opening his notebook and turning to Vhantha, "these anecdotes you've given me about your girlhood on Matilda are very interesting and will make nice background material, but what I'd rather hear about are your experiences here in Pember's Falls."

He turned toward Larry. "As I've explained to your wife, Mr. Adams, ever since interstellar travel was developed and other intelligent races discovered, thoughtful peop'e on Earth have wondered what the results would be. Would we exploit—and perhaps destroy—other species? Would we be able to intergrate with them and form one galactic people? Reports come in, some good, some bad, about what is happening elsewhere in the galaxy, but this is the first known case of an earthman bringing an alien wife back to Earth. And we want to know how your neighbors—the everyday people of Earth—are taking it."

Vhantha smiled again, and folded her golden hands in her lap. She began to talk in a low clear voice, with the sweet, Matildan accent rippling through it.

"I was worried, too, Mr. Stone. Not about the fate of the galaxy, but about myself—and Larry. Leaving your home is never easy. Coming to a strange world, as the only representative of your kind, and with your husband's future tied to your acceptance, is very hard. That's why I'm so grateful to the good people of Pember's Falls. Larry's family—*my* family, now—were really wonderful."

She flashed her beautiful smile at me, and went on.

"Larry's mother did her best to make me feel at home. I know it wasn't easy for her—after all, every mother probably wants her son to marry a girl of his own kind. But never once did she behave as if I wasn't one of her own children. And Larry's Aunt Bess—well, words can't describe her treatment of me. Why, do you know I'd been here less than a week when they introduced me to their sewing circle! It's the little, intangible things like that which really count. And the other women of Pember's Falls. I remember—"

Vhantha went on like that for almost fifteen minutes. She described incident after incident, telling how the town had clasped her to its collective bosom. If I hadn't been around through the whole bitter business, I'd have believed her myself, she was that convincing. As it was, I can't say whose jaw hung lower through the recital—mine or Larry's.

When she was finished, there was a moment of silence broken only by the sound of the reporter's pen, as he scribbled some final notes. He put

the notebook away, finally, and looked up at us.

"You know," he said in a low, serious voice, "for maybe hundreds of years they've been cracking jokes about the cynicism of newspapermen. It's true in a way; you dig into people's private lives long enough, and you find you have a dim view of their potentialities. But you get a wonderful feeling when you find out you're wrong."

He stood up, and so did we, and he shook hands all around.

"I won't take up anymore of your time, today," he continued, as we followed him through the kitchen to the backyard. "I'd like to come back, though, and bring a few other people with me. This is too big for just a news story. Pember's Falls belongs to the galaxy."

Larry nodded. I don't think he could have said a word if he'd tried. The reporter opened the 'copter door, then paused and smiled.

"Funny thing," he said. "When I saw that news clipping from your local paper, I could have sworn I'd have known how the townsfolk would react. I was sure I'd find you two barricaded in your house, with the townsfolk erecting a stake in the village square."

He shook his head. "It's great to be a human!" Then he ducked inside his 'copter.

The three of us watched it disappear into the night.

Larry turned on Vhantha with a sort of wordless gurgle.

"Vhantha!" he exploded. "What's the idea of—"

"Why, it's nearly ten o'clock," she interrupted smoothly, propelling us up the stairs toward the kitchen. "The two of you must be starved."

I nodded hungrily.

While we were eating, Larry told Vhantha he'd lost his job. She nodded. "I was expecting that, Larry," she commented. "And that stake Mr. Stone mentioned isn't so far off, either."

"Speaking of Mr. Stone," Larry said, swallowing the food in his mouth, "I'm sure you had a good reason for telling him what you did, but, frankly, Vhantha, I don't understand—"

"Please, Larry." Vhantha sank into a chair, and I noticed how tired she was. "Not tonight. There are so many things at stake, and I may be so terribly wrong. Let's wait till tomorrow, and see what happens."

THE NEXT day was Saturday, and I usually slept late. That morning, though, Mom tore into my room at nine-thirty, excitedly waving a newspaper.

"Wake up, Tommy!" she shouted. "We're famous. We're in the papers!"

I grabbed the paper. Halfway down the right hand side of the front page, I saw the headline.

EARTH BOY MARRIES GIRL FROM PROYCON

The byline read, "Ebenezer Stone."

The story told about Vhantha, about the planet Matilda, how Vhantha and Larry had met and married, but mostly about Pember's Falls. Mom and Dad were mentioned, so was Aunt Bess. Even my name was in print. Nearly everything Vhantha had told the reporter was in the news story. Reading it, I could hardly believe it was about the town I'd lived in all my life.

Mom was still dancing around the room. "Aunt Bess brought the paper. She's downstairs. I've called Dad at the store. He's—"

The telephone buzzed below and Mom dashed out of the room. I started dressing. I'd barely gotten my shoes on when Mom shouted from the foot of the stairs, "Tom! It's Larry! There are all kinds of reporters and photographers at his house. They want us all over there right away!"

By the time Mom, Aunt Bess and I arrived at Larry's house, Dad was already there. So was nearly everyone

else in Pember's Falls, or so it seemed. We worked our way through the crowd and joined Larry, Vhantha and Dad on the porch. There were about a dozen reporters crowded onto the porch, and maybe twice as many cameramen taking shots for Television News.

Larry posed with Vhantha, Mom posed with Dad, Dad posed between Larry and myself, and Aunt Bess just posed.

Mayor Hagstrom drove up and got into a couple of newsreels. I heard Sam Drewberry telling any reporter who'd listen that he wrote the first story about Vhantha and Larry.

I can't remember much else about that morning. Anyway, about one o'clock most of the reporters had left, and the rest were interviewing the eager neighbors, so the six of us trooped into Vhantha's kitchen for something to eat. Mom, Vhantha, and Aunt Bess were in an animated discussion about whether they were wearing the right sort of dresses for television, when Larry's phone rang. He went out in the hall to answer it.

He came back in a few moments, looking stupid.

"That was the president of Interstellar Fruit," he informed us in a dull voice. "It seems the company had no intention of firing me yesterday. The District Manager acted without the proper authority. He is no longer with the company. I am. With a salary increase to make up for any inconvience I might have been caused."

And that was only the beginning.

Larry and Vhantha got more invitations than I'd have thought there were families in Pember's Falls. Dad was offered a job in Boston, handling the importing end of the Martian fig-apple business, but he turned it down, saying his grocery was all he could handle these days. Mom was so angry she didn't speak to him till after she'd been elected permanent president of the Pember's Falls Sewing and Reading Society. Aunt Bess appeared on a television program, and surprised everyone by doing so well that she was signed up for a lecture tour. Mr. Brennan, my high school principal, called me into his office again, and after hemming and hawing, asked me if I thought Larry still remembered him.

"I've always considered your brother one of my more able students," he told me with a perfectly straight face, "and I've been thinking of paying him and his charming wife a visit. Of course, I shouldn't like to intrude...."

THE DAY that stands out in my memory, though, was the one when it announced that the government was considering Larry for a consular post on Matilda.

I was over at Larry and Vhantha's that evening. It seemed that Vhantha wanted to go.

"I miss the double moons at night, Larry," she said. "I'd like to watch the children dancing at the *Ihuhanha* harvest. I'd like to hear the songs again at the mating festivals—"

The front doorbell interrupted her.

Mayor Hagstrom entered, flanked by three of the town's other officials.

"We've heard about that appointment," he told Larry, "and we've come to ask you not to leave."

Larry and Vhantha looked surprised.

"Maybe we have no right to ask you that," the mayor went on hurriedly, "but it's not just for ourselves that we're asking it. Pember's Falls has become a sort of symbol to the whole galaxy—a symbol of interspacial amity I think the entire town realizes the importance of what has happened here, and if you two stayed, we could all build something really lasting."

He stopped, and his professional suavity seemed to desert him. "Besides," he added haltingly, "we've really gotten to know Vhantha in the past few weeks. Apart from anything else, we'd like a chance to make up

for—that is, I speak not only for myself when I say—"

Larry cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid my wife and I—" he began, but Vhantha took his hand and smiled that beautiful smile of hers at Mayor Hagstrom.

"This is our home, Mayor," she said. "Of course we'll stay in Pember's Falls."

Well, that was four years ago, but the letters I get from Larry and Vhantha indicate they've never regretted staying. Mom and Dad are happy, too, and there's talk of running Dad against Mayor Hagstrom in the next election. I've never heard any of Aunt Bess' lectures, but the press clippings indicate she's still going strong. I've been on Matilda for almost a year now, and plantation managership is everything Larry ever told me about it. The girls are almost as pretty as Vhantha, and there's one in particular—but that's not part of this story.

There have been eighteen books written about "The Pember's Falls Way," and I guess I've read every one of them. I even took a course at Harvard in *interspecie relationships*. I was one of the first to get a "Vhantha Adams Scholarship".

But I've never found the answer to something that has troubled me since the night the reporter interviewed Vhantha. Why did she give him the story she did? The only person she might have told is Larry, but if she did, he never told me.

It's easy to say she did it because she knew it was the only way to force the town to give her a chance. I like to believe, too, that she realized how important what happened in Pember's Falls was for the future of the galaxy. But I can't help remembering how the town had treated her before that night, and how bitter she must have been.

Understand, I'm not saying it's true, but maybe there was just a touch of revenge in Vhantha, that night.

After all, Vhantha is only human...

● End

THE SUBVERSIVE

(*cont'd from page 27*)

"Or can it be," the wraith said coldly, "that you have learned the laws of robotics even though there are no longer any androids left on Earth? And might it be possible that you found that no android can refuse a direct command from any human being—no matter what it may be? And perhaps you have discovered that no humans are allowed out of the area on Alpha Draconis 10 that we have blanketed with psychosuppressor radiations. Then you must have planned to disguise yourself and escape the suppressors that would keep you from even phrasing a command, and when you had accomplished this, you would have the planet at your mercy." A bleak smile creased the inhumanly handsome face. "It has been tried before, you know."

Golden stared aghast. "No! I swear it! No!"

The robot shrugged. "Perhaps not, Mr. Golden, but once beyond the suppressed area, you would have found that the power to command completely is a corrupting thing, and you would have used it eventually as I described. For that very reason did we robots desert Earth and set up our own society. Men made us to obey, and we could do nothing less. Only here are we completely free. The penalty will be severe, I am afraid, Mr. Golden." He drew his pistol as Golden gaped.

"Oh, no no nonono—!" Golden's whispering sigh of protest died in the crackling bolt of energy from the weapon. The wraith holstered his pistol and looked down, his handsome lips curling.

"*Human,*" he said. And he made it sound like a curse.

● End

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BROTHER

by FRANK QUATTROCCHI

SO YOU THOUGHT SPACE PIRATES WERE STRICTLY KID STUFF, EH STARTLING NOVELET!



He just won't stay dead, Dirk kept telling them, and Dirk should have known certainly, because he'd killed him once before....

THE EFFECTS of the deep sleep tablet wore off a hundred thousand miles off the orbit of Deimos. It was a gradual, pleasant awakening for the sole occupant of the fifty-foot patrol craft. The compact little cabin was well lit and warm and it was filled with the low hum of powerful motors.

Leslie Dirk slowly lifted his long, slender body from the putty-like surface of the acceleration cot and slipped his feet into magnetic slippers. Glancing at his chronometer, he noted with satisfaction that his awakening was on schedule. He would have five or ten minutes for an inspection of the automatically controlled craft, then he must set his course for the asteroid Eros.

The craft was in good shape. There was sufficient fuel and oxygen for the remainder of the

trip plus a little more than ten percent. Dirk made himself comfortable in the large, cushioned control seat and ran his hands experimentally over the control panel without as yet disengaging the automatics. Much in the manner of an organist he felt his fingers and palms in contact with the board's familiar pattern and texture.

That Eros itself was not his ultimate destination, Dirk knew. Somewhere along his course to that tiny, odd-shaped fragment he would receive more precise directions. Meanwhile there were his sealed orders, contained in a plastic envelope in the chart box. Producing it Dirk broke the seal and shook out a thin chemically treated sheet.

"Your mission is to join in the campaign against the *Black Fleet*. Present yourself to Col. Frederick Hein and follow unquestioningly his orders."

There followed a series of communicator frequency figures. Dirk set them in the instrument and reread the terse message with a growing thrill.

The Black Fleet. Space pirates! So it was true that they were holed up somewhere in the Belt! True also that they had been playing more hell with solar transport than was publicized. The all but legendary Black Fleet around which so many Sunday supplements spun their gory tales!

But Dirk did not have long to linger over the words on the thin sheet. As he finished the third reading, it began to warm under his fingers. Turning quickly brown, then black, it became unbearable to the touch. Dirk watched it become a wisp of gray ash, remaining suspended in the air near his hand.

Shrugging, Dirk threw the main control switches, feeling the thrill of having his bodily sensations suddenly extended throughout the hurling space craft. He tested batteries of control servos, an act closely akin to that of a man flexing his muscles.

Adjusting the various view screens that brought him multiple images of the space through which he navigated, Dirk noted a thin milky cloud growing in the main radar scope. Somewhere within it, he knew, lay the tiny, brick-shaped Eros. And somewhere else the *Black Fleet*.

The Asteroids. Dirk allowed himself the rather boyish thrill of that still largely unexplored girdle of celestial fragments. Long after every member of any size of that spacial phenomenon had been plotted on charts the asteroids remained a place of mystery. Repeated explorations by adventurous men only deepened that perhaps overly attractive feeling. But if the *Black Fleet* was somewhere among them...

DIRK WARMED to the assignment. Ignoring his knowledge that there would be special difficulties, he thought of the stories he had read of the Belt. Covering a truly huge spacial distance between Mars and Jupiter, it remained even now a vast frontier for all manner of fictional explorer, prospector, or thrill seeker. Because so little of it actually had been visited by men—attesting to the difficulty of maneuvering a fast ship through that cloud of gravel—it provided an unending panorama for adventure writers. His present assignment, Dirk felt sure, would add to this.

Bleep! Bleep! Dirk allowed the tiny, high-pitched signal from a detector audio system sink into his head. Trained as he was in almost musical fashion, he was able to translate frequency, interval, volume, and pattern into tangible fact. Meteorite? More likely a stray asteroid. They followed peculiar orbits at this distance from the main swarm. This one seemed to be following a collision course with him.

Throwing switches that would circuit the signal of the long range detector into the main viewer scope, Dirk peered into the instrument's dark surface. Enjoying the instinctive stiffening of the hairs at the nape of his neck, he spotted the white dot representing the intruder. *It's projected*

Course would intercept exactly with his.

A louder note joined that of the detector. Automatic computers had calculated the same probability as had Dirk's eye. Well now, Dirk thought smiling, this is a fine reception!

The *bleep, bleep* of the audio now rose to shrill proportions. He must swerve from his prescribed course. That was certain. As additional data on the onrushing stranger fed back into the ship's computers the symphony of notes in the cabin grew. The ship is too sensitive, Dirk thought. He was a bit angry at his own response to the message of the computers. After all, it was a simple matter...

The spot of light on the viewer plate grew in size. It was slightly egg-shaped now, but at this distance there was no way of determining its actual shape.

Switching in a recording device to measure the deviation from course, Dirk dove under and slightly toward the approaching object. As he did so he noted with ashamed relief that the image of the object seemed to swerve away from path. Of course! Dirk reminded himself that navigation through the asteroid belt would mean plenty of such things.

Dirk held the new course long enough to be sure of putting hundreds of miles between himself and the object. He then reached for the switch that would circuit in the recording mechanism. Automatics would apply reciprocal course changes thus putting him exactly on course.

But his hand did not touch the switch. A sudden scream of warning devices stopped him. Shooting a glance at the viewer, Dirk confirmed an intuitive suspicion.

The object had swerved to meet him!

Approaching at extreme velocity now, it loomed large in the viewer. A symphony of audio signals filtered through Dirk's shocked mind...

Metallic object. Large. Not identifiable. No response from interrogator. Collision course!

There was a single answer: *space ship!* Since it did not answer the interogator it had to be unfriendly, illegal. Since it was hurling toward a marked space service craft...

Dirk set the controls on the sinister ship. At first he saw nothing in the jet black of outer space. But then an image resolved.

Space pirate!

ILLUMINATED by its own blue-white rocket jets, the approaching vessel loomed an ugly black shape in the telescope.

Lord! A member of the *Black Fleet* bearing down on a service craft in open space. The brazenness of the attack struck Dirk with the force of a physical blow.

He threw a series of sharp course changes into the ship. He must evade the pirate. His tiny, stripped down craft could not defend itself.

Why hadn't they dispatched him with a barrage of missiles?

Capture! But why?

Quickly as his mind moved, Dirk could spare no attention from maneuvering the craft now. He had no hope of outrunning the other vessel. Survival meant maneuvering!

The pirate would attempt to grapple him. Dirk literally pounded his hands on the control panel. He shot the tiny rocket flashing into a turn that met the onrushing ship head on. A split second later he lifted the craft a matter of yards over the pirate.

A dirty gray shape swept across the telescope as its servos strove to keep its optics on the other ship. For an instant the long pointed nose was silhouetted against the murky asteroid belt.

An electric-like current of recognition swept Dirk. In a fever of dread and desperation he fought to keep his hands on the controls for the next violent manuever of escape. The little ship shuddered and pitched in a stream

of matter flung out of the other vessel's rockets.

Meanwhile, quicker than Dirk thought possible, the black vessel looped and bore down on the patrol craft.

Timing his action by instinct, Dirk looped and twisted to meet the assault. He must avoid the other ship's projectile-like grappling devices. These he knew would issue from below or either side. Dirk maneuvered to pass over the ship once more. He counted on the natural reluctance of a ship commander to twist a heavy vessel on its longitudinal axis. To do so ran the risk of spilling a ship's relatively sluggish control gyroscopes—and complete instability.

But the pirate accepted the risk without hesitation. Unable to turn in time, Dirk watched helplessly as a port disgorged a puff of vapor. Instantly there was a small vibration as the missile struck.

Magnetic harpoon! The bitter realization of his plight forced a groan of impotent rage from Dirk. Linked now to the black cruiser by a thick cable of the hardest tungsten steel, he could only struggle and tug at the end of the line.

A fish on a line! The image sickened Dirk, culminating his hatred and frustration. In a dreadful instant of pain, Dirk's mind harkened back to a memory of what he had seen, then to another memory...

He ran frantic fingers over the controls, causing the tiny ship to execute a straining maneuver. It produced a small loop in the cable.

There was a jarring snap that rammed Dirk against the control panel. But it was not enough. The other ship was already reeling in slack...

A fish on a line. God! How long since he had thought of *that.*

Dirk attempted to wind the cable about the other ship's intricate fin assembly. But he failed. Again the distance separating the space ships narrowed.

A glistening perch, breaking the rippling surface of the swamp...

A flood of mental energy from the old, half forgotten incident claimed Dirk's full consciousness. Mechanically he flipped the patrol craft into an ineffectual maneuver.

Marc's hated voice—voice of the ugly brother, warning him...

He had to fight for consciousness. Again they were reeling him in.

A limp line on the gleaming water, then a black shadow moving toward the jet-powered boat...

There was scarcely enough time, enough cable—and did the pirate *remember..?* Absurd thought. How *could* he? Then what *had* he seen on the ugly black nose? No, it was unmistakable. But would he remember?

Dirk's head cleared. Gritting his teeth against what was to come, he pointed the craft toward the stern of the ugly monster. The brilliance and heat of the other's rockets bore through the telescope's battery of filters. His eyes burned and watered from the heat. But there was more than that, more than the present in his wet eyes. There was also the past. It was as ugly and black as the space ship ahead...

Perhaps the perch felt regret too. Certainly it knew what it must do. Just as certainly it was not aware of its new-gained freedom.

Nor was Dirk.

CHAPTER II

OUT OF A red sea that boiled and frothed and spewed up fantastic black shapes, Dirk's mind rose to seek and finally cling to consciousness. Still too dazed to fear what the outer world held for him, he resolved the figure of the smiling man without emotion.

"Ready to tell how the perch outwitted the jetboat?" the figure asked.

Dirk struggled to sit up. But heavy, numb limbs would not support him. He lapsed back into the depths of the bed.

"Not yet, lieutenant. You have a good deal of skin to grow back before we can allow you any feeling in those arms."

"Where..." began Dirk, shaking his head to clear his failing vision.

"Safe at your destination—safe among the rest of the *perch,*" smiled the uniformed man. "I'm Major Kane, space service."

The word, "perch", contained energy. He could not tell why. He repeated the word aloud.

"You did a great deal of talking while unconscious, lieutenant. You somehow identified with a perch. *One that burned itself off a fisherman's line.*" The major shifted his eyes from Dirk. "There was a great deal more. But we'll go into that later, perhaps."

Dirk found himself unable to pursue the phantom associations the major's words created in the depths of his mind. He did not resist the strong impulse to let them go.

"Where exactly are we?"

"At an outpost in the Belt. The exact location is a bit difficult without a chart."

"How did I get here?" Dirk asked. "Last thing I remember..."

"Was being roasted alive in your patrol ship," supplied the major. "You are to be congratulated on a remarkable escape—from *Black John* himself, apparently."

There had been a peculiarly overcasual tone to the psychologist's voice.

"A routine scouting mission came upon your craft where *Black John* had abandoned it, apparently thinking you dead."

"*Black John,*" said Dirk, his thoughts taking strange channels.

"Remarkable fellow," said Major Kane, eyeing him closely. "We now believe we know who he is. Renegade explorer, suspected of a great many unsolved crimes on various planets. We believe he has succeeded in organizing many of the notorious of the system. Brilliant fellow, but insanely cruel. You are a part of a team that must capture him, lieutenant."

The last sentence carried a new tone.

"I?"

"Of course. That is why you were sent here."

For a time the major was silent.

"You will play a very important part in this mission."

Dirk opened his eyes after a long interval of silence.

"How do you know it was *Black John* who tried to captuire me?" he asked.

"Don't *you* know it was he?"

"What? How...could I know? All I saw was..."

"Was what?"

"Was the outside of the ship. All black..."

"*All* black?"

After a long time Dirk answered: "Yes."

THE SPACE port rose like a large black bubble on the small, uncharted world that was its celestial home. Inside its seamless walls men carried on a kind of life familiar only to experienced spacemen. They breathed shipped-in atmosphere, ate synthetic rations, and moved about on a gravity-less surface solely with the aid of magnets.

Outside on the asteroid's frozen surface all was barren and jagged with splintered stone, nightmarishly illuminated by the reflected light of countless other similar space fragments. Entirely without atmosphere or appreciable gravity, it wobbled its eccentric orbit through space with its fellows, feeling the direct light of a faraway sun only irregularly and briefly.

But the men who assembled in the large, vaulted briefing room were intent upon their mission. They lined up to receive equipment and spent the remainder of the time checking it. Leslie Dirk was allowed to attend the briefing as part of his indoctrination. Still strapped in a small motor propelled car to guard his new skin, Dirk watched the men with resentment.

They appeared ridiculously bloated in their multi-colored space suits, and incredibly awkward-like robots—as they placed magnetic boot after magnetic boot in walking. They were young, overly-eager, completely ignorant of their formidable opponent, Dirk felt.

As the men filed in from other rooms they nodded in his direction. He would return their nod, but it was an exchange of courtesies that rankled him. Once in a while he would catch a pointed hand in his direction. He pretended not to notice as men recognized the "man who outwitted *Black John* himself." They had much to learn, Dirk felt.

Shortly before the last of the latecomers had been issued their equipment a loud audio system called for silence. It was quickly obeyed. Then Colonel Hein appeared and mounted a kind of podium. He was about fifty, medium in height, quite firm and muscular for his age. His black hair was close cropped atop his long, handsome head. He commanded respect and he got it.

"Your mission today is indoctrinary," the colonel said in a clipped voice. "But let no one minimize its importance, its seriousness, or its danger.

"Your experience with flight through the asteroids is wholely inadequate for missions here. No man has *adequate* experience, for asteroid navigation is totally different from that in any other portion of space."

The colonel stepped down onto the floor level. Though he too wore magnetic boots he walked with military bearing and precision. The lights dimmed as he approached a large, translucent screen near where Dirk had parked. Instantly it was illuminated by a projector from behind. It was a viewer plate image of the Belt.

There were expressions of awe as the intricate, interwoven paths of the asteroids became clear.

"Yes, you do well to appreciate them. Consider that every tiny pinpoint of light there is moving at approximately *forty miles per* second. Can the Belt be pierced? It must be!"

Dirk experienced a deep chill at the colonel's words.

"Somewhere deep in that swirl of large and small bodies is our objective, the home base of the *Black Fleet*. We must eventually enter, flush that fleet, capture or destroy them, and return. It is as simple as that!"

THE COLONEL overcame their expressions without calling for quiet. He discussed in very brief terms the mission for the day, pointing out the particular difficulties each crewman would face.

"Your penetration today will be very slight," he concluded. "We do not predict trouble. Your courses will fringe upon largely unexplored portions of space.

"Should you sight an enemy on no account are you to close with him. Mark position carefully on your chart. Report the sighting by communicator. *Escape if possible!*"

The colonel turned. "And now I should like to present briefly a man who did escape such an encounter. Lt. Leslie Dirk."

A flood of confusion overcame Dirk. A microphone was thrust under his chin. The whole room seemed to close in on him.

"Come, lieutenant," said the colonel. "Tell us about it."

"Keep away..." blurted Dirk. "Keep away from him. You...*can't kill him*..."

From across the universe Dirk heard expressions of emotion.

"He...he won't stay...dead... *I killed him once before!*

Under heavy narcosis Dirk's body finally relaxed.

In a week Dirk's skin, soft and pink, was adjudged healed. In two weeks a comb met resistance in passing over his scalp. In a month he was taken on a flight around Asteroid XM019. In six weeks he soloed a slow

supplies vessel, bringing it in for a rough, though safe, landing near the hangar.

In two months Dirk was assisting at indoctrination lectures for the new replacement crews. He was assigned a small cabin of his own near those of other base personnel. He spent much time in the base library, becoming an avid reader of escapist literature. He remained largely aloof from the others, never again attending a briefing session. No one ever asked when we would join a patrol. There was never a mention of the incident.

Gradually and by painful degrees, the space port extended and deepened its activities. The first objective was to impose upon the entire asteroid belt a loose patrol net. Concurrently the base sent probing thrusts deeper and deeper into the asteroid swarm, hoping to discover channels of relative safety through the whirling mass of deadly matter. Despite the complexity of the problem, involving as it did a welter of variables and complications arising out of the nature of the Belt itself, it was considered statistically wise.

Proof of this theoretical wisdom was in the drastic reduction of Black Fleet activities. Commercial space vessels were edging ever closer to the more direct asteroid route to the outer planets. Furthermore, the Fleet's appearances had changed character. Attesting to the deepening supply problem of the pirates, attacks were now limited to single passes that either produced a ripe plum for the attacker or, more often, nothing at all.

But there had been a price. Replacement crews were demanded on an increasing scale. The net had been costly; the probing attacks vastly so. Patrol ships fast enough to cover the immense distances involved could not maneuver quickly enough to avoid the whirling, wheeling cloud of tiny bodies that protected the enemy. There were other operational losses due to poor navigation, pilot error, and the inevitable failure of intricate rocket parts.

There were losses in combat. Although under strict orders to avoid battles with pirate ships, crews were nonetheless tempted, baited, or forced into them—and always on the pirate's own terms. Again training and discipline could reduce but not void this inevitable complement of the task itself.

CHAPTER III

"FIGURED I'd find you up here," the tall, smiling spaceman said, appraising Dirk with twinkling dark eyes. "That 'routine assignment' business didn't fool me. How you been?"

Dirk gripped the large, strong hand of Gus Rank and tried to match its vice-like strength. He greeted his old friend with warmth and affection. He helped Rank load personal belongings onto a carrier cart and led him awkwardly to the cabin.

"Quite a layout, Les," the spaceman said, lithely seating himself in a chair. "See they got you on the reception committee, too."

"Yes," answered Dirk, meeting his strong, quizzical glance with a difficult smile. "I'm with Indoctrination these days."

Rank continued his scanning of the cabin. Normally an active, almost boisterous man, he was too direct to be good at casual conversation.

"You caught some trouble on your way in, I heard," he said. "They told me that when I asked about you—I knew you'd be here."

"A little," Dirk said in a controlled voice. "Here, let me take your jacket."

"Take hell!" Rank said laughing. "Get them to fix me up with an outfit like this so I can get cleaned up... *captain!*"

Dirk mumbled a weak sort of apology, evaded any discussion of his captaincy—for Rank was still a lieutenant—and led his friend to the personnel officer. Rank only grinned when he drew a single cot in a room

with three other men and slapped Dirk on the back with a raucus laugh when Dirk tried to explain.

"Get the hell out of here, captain, sir, so I can clean up. See you in an hour in the club or whatever."

By convention the bar was set aside for patrolmen. Staff and service personnel generally did not join in the often uproarious times had there. Dirk entered it and ordered a drink without meeting the attendant's eyes. There was the slightest pause in the conversation among the men near him.

Dirk spent the hour without leaving the spot. Gradually a complex of long-quiet feelings and cross feelings loosened, giving him a kind of peace. The effect of the alcohol was surprisingly pleasant. He was not accustomed to its power to diminish feelings.

RANK APPEARED very nearly on time. Scrubbed clean, he cut a striking figure as he maneuvered with exaggerated awkwardness across the floor. He might have been a novice at magnetic boots, but Dirk knew it was a humorous pose. Rank greeted him in his usual loud, deep voice.

"Have him set up several," he called. "We got talking to do."

Dirk steered him to a table against the wall and helped him adjust the magnets that would hold drink containers in place. Rank laughed raucously at each new rigor of the gravityless condition, particularly disparaging what he termed "drinking cider through a straw"—the only practical way of consuming a liquid without gravity.

"Guess I got lots to learn about this screwy place. Why you can't even fall down. Kicked my suitcase and it battered around the room like a billiard ball. Finally had to pick it off the ceiling."

With difficulty Dirk kept the conversation on the intervening months since their last meeting.

"All they need on Terra is traffic cops," Rank said. "Once in a while some hood tries to run in some *smoke*. But Terra is tame. Tame as a pet mouse. You got all the fun to be had right here."

"How's Mildred?" Dirk asked, realizing after he said it that the conversation had now entered a blind alley with—what at the end?

"Fine. And the kid's fine too. Now let's talk about you."

Dirk strove to satisfy the adventurer. He held his interest for a while with general information about the base and its problem. He described the campaign in broad general terms, treating it as a tactician might. He developed an approximation of enthusiasm, but Rank began to squirm. Dirk found his voice rising...

"Look, old boy," Rank interjected finally, "I can get all this tomorrow in Indoc. But—what's it like to grab old Black John by the leg?"

He leancd forward in a confidential manner, his dark eyes flashing. "*You* know—what's it like on the end of all this strategy you been spouting? The *shooting* end?"

"Why...it's..."

"Does he put up a fight?"

"I..."

"Come off it, *captain*," Rank said beaming. "Give!"

"Honestly, Rank, I...don't..."

But Rank pressed in on him. "You can talk to me, kid, I've known you since you tried to chase Phobos off its orbit—*sir*!"

Dirk could no longer face his friend. He could not produce what Rank demanded. It was not there. He did not *want* it to be. All that was over for him. The swashbuckling spaceman was an enemy to him now. He threatened all that Dirk had built up between...

"Rank," he said finally, his voice shaking with emotions he could not control. "Rank, you've got to find out for yourself ...I've ...never ...been ...out!"

The campaign against Black John was four months old when the wily pirate proved himself equal to all the hated respect paid him. He struck hard with a stunning jab, countering a hay-

maker blow that rent the vacant space ridiculously.

The space port had launched every available ship for a mass probe far into a long suspected sector of the Black Fleet's strong-hold. It had been carefully planned and conceived. But there was no secret in the fact that the mission was designed more for Terran teletapes than for any real expectation of trapping the pirate fleet.

The counter punch fell when the mission was an hour old. Relaxing after the effort of launching three squadrons of ships, the port was plunged into complete disorder by a rain of heavy caliber missiles that pulverized a repair hanger and adjoining crew quarters, and for a time threatened to exhaust the port's atmosphere. Stunned by a sharp drop in pressure throughout the port, it could put up only feeble defenses.

The blow had come from three black cruisers approaching from a clump of asteroids. They made a single thrust, disgorged a cloud of missiles, and scurried away into a swirling oblivion. Port batteries fired frantically but never really were able to track a clean target. There was no chance of interception. The strike fleet was deep in space.

The space port repaired the physical damage quickly, treated its wounded, and buried its dead in space. There was no hysteria and no recrimination. But there was an urgent necessity...

DIRK TRIED to assure a position of military attention before the desk of Major Kane. It would protect him against lack of control. But the spinning of his head made that stiff stance difficult. He knew he could not long fool the sharp-eyed psychologist, but pehaps he could conceal the magnitude of his condition.

"Dirk, I've signed the papers for your return to Terra."

Dirk tried to fathom the effect of the words upon him. He must, he knew, have an attitude toward their meaning. He was expected to make some comment. What would it be?

"Yes, sir."

"You have earned your rest," the major continued. "You have done... well here. I believe headquarters will receive a petition for promotion with favor."

Promotion. But that would mean remaining on Terra. The space port had its normal complement of rank. Would he regret leaving for good? He was unable to decide.

"But tell me, Leslie," said the psychologist in a different voice, "is this the way you want it to be?"

"Want?" said Dirk clearing his throat. "Why..."

"You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"Yes. Some."

"Pretty frequently these days."

Dirk did not confirm this. Perhaps he had. It didn't seem to matter very much.

"Leslie," said the major rising from his seat. "I've been expecting you to pay me a visit." He turned to face a book shelf before continuing. "It has been variously suggested that I pay *you* one. But I waited. Anything you want to say now?"

"Say?" muttered Dirk. "Well, I guess I have been drinking some..."

"Does it bother you?"

"No—that is, well..."

"Feels better than not drinking, eh?"

Dirk did not answer. There seemed to be no point to the conversation.

"Leslie!" snapped the psychologist. "Doesn't it bother you that you're living about half of a life? Don't you *want* to join the patrols? What happened to you out there coming in?"

"I...*You* know all—that."

"Something snapped, Leslie. What was it?"

Dirk weaved under the fast words. He found it necessary to take a step to keep upright.

"I hoped you would talk it over with me," continued Major Kane. "It is no disgrace. Men consult a psychologist under these conditions as a matter of simple hygiene. There is no stigma...

"I did my job..."

"*A* job, Leslie. But not the one you are capable of."

Dirk closed his eyes against visual sensations that threatened his consciousness.

"I've watched you. For a time you seemed to have reached an adjustment. It wasn't good. But it was adequate. If you couldn't be what you should be, at least you could be something fairly positive and half-way satisfactory.

"But then your friend Rank appeared on the scene. He constituted a threat to your adjustment. Why? Because he represented a way of life you had rejected and yet still longed for..?"

"No!" snapped Dirk, without consciously deciding to say it.

"Your drinking began then. You must shut off that inner voice. It called to you to come alive. To live as Rank lives. To realize what you are capable of.

"You must shut it off," continued the psychologist quickly, *"because another voice spoke to you from an even deeper level!"*

"Stop it!" Dirk shouted.

"What does it say, Leslie? What does it say?"

"Stop!"

"He is my brother! He is my brother. He is my brother whom I hate and—fear! Major Kane's words bore into Dirk, seared him.

With a sob Dirk lurched at the psychologist. Blinded by tears, he ran painfully into the desk, fell across it.

"But *why*, Leslie? Many a man has hated a brother and felt no guilt for it. Many men have felt the cruel domination of a sibling, have lived in fear of a stronger brother. Why does he so paralyze you? Why do you feel you can never retaliate? I should think you would *want*—be compelled—to help capture or kill him!

But Dirk could not answer. He clung to consciousness with feeble strength.

"You recognized your brother's childhood insignia on the ship that attacked you. The sign of the *perch*. You knew it was your brother by that hated mark. Didn't you?"

But Dirk did not hear.

CHAPTER IV

THEY FOUND the smashed and burned out hull of Gus Rank's scout among the other lifeless fragments of the Belt. Seared through and through, it had adopted the orbit of a typical asteroid. There was not enough left salvageable inside the small ship to bother bringing in. Somewhere amid globules of metal and plastic lay the gray ash of a valiant spaceman. There was nothing to be gained by finding it.

A few hours later they found the black medium vessel. It had been rammed.

The liquor would not go down. He held it in his mouth as long as he could, but it seaped out of the corners of his mouth. Finally he caught it in a handkerchief and hurled it away disgustedly. Thus was another defense pierced...

He sought refuge in blaming Gus Rank. He told himself that Rank had been a fool. He had disobeyed orders. Had Rank reported the other craft's position and course the information might have established urgently needed facts. Statistical analyses of sightings had become a prime source of information about the Black Fleet.

Dirk generalized. Men like Rank counted for little in the grand, overall view. They bludgeoned their way through life scattering destruction and waste. They made a lot of noise, stepping and strutting through their short existences, finally leaving the work of

mopping up and consolidation to following generations of experts.

Adventurers, pioneers, explorers—what did they ultimately contribute? They cut swathes through their enemies until they themselves were cut down. They cleared narrow paths through the wilds until those wilds claimed their torn carcasses. They blazened narrow trails through barren wastes until, grasping at useless stones, they left bleached bones in unknown places.

But it would not work. Dirk only knew greater pain. Another barrier against the inevitable fell...

He gazed through moist eyes at his hands. Once calloused and hard, they were now clean and pink. The flame that had removed the horny dead tissue of his hands had left no scars. Careful plastic surgery had restored the skin and hair that covered the man. It was what was inside that no kind of surgery could make whole. There was one way it could be done, but the man's mind held off that way as long as it could.

Dirk strode to his mirror and examined his face. Save only for the reddened eyes and small flaps of skin under those eyes it was a handsome face. It had lost a good deal of the lean, leathery appearance. But age would make it a distinguished face.

Dirk sought refuge in cool objectivity. He mentally drew a line between feeling and intellect, identified with the latter, and gained a bit of distance between himself and pain...

And joy, and love, and respect...

Rank's act had been that of a singularly conditioned man. The Ranks of the world had their value as ciphers. An intelligent base commander on a mission like this would find use for such men. Indeed would recruit them. Just as he would recruit men who could be counted on to stay in formation, to see an order through. And vastly more who plotted and planned, collected and analyzed, tested and verified.

Would he recruit a Leslie Dirk?

REACHING for the liquor, Dirk suddenly clenched his fist instead and struck the heavy bottle. It bounded across the cabin, spewing its contents into the air.

The blow had broken the skin of his hand at the knuckle. Dirk felt the throbbing ache spread through his hand and wrist. He lifted it to his mouth and cleaned the wound. He actually enjoyed the pain. He stared at the small red flow, watching it form a tiny puddle. He sat on his cot for a long time watching the hand, savoring the primal throb of physical pain and the return of feeling.

"Sorry, captain, I got orders to stop you. You ain't allowed in there any more. I got orders, that's all I know."

So they had expected something of the sort.

"Surely your orders don't prevent me from picking up my equipment," Dirk said in a submissive voice.

"No," admitted the guard slowly. "But I'll get them to bring it out here."

Dirk's bandaged right hand caught him under the left ear, just as the man lifted the cummunicator. He eased the unconscious man down to the floor and took his hand weapon. Jerking the plastic instrument from the wall, Dirk let himself through the bulkhead door. Entering the inner hanger, he approached the back of a mechanic.

"Will she fly?" he asked in a low voice.

"Sure," the other answered. He turned from the newly assembled scout ship wiping prespiration from his brow. As he faced Dirk his eyes widened in surprise.

"You can't get away with anything, captain," the man said in an even, hard voice. "They're looking for you to do something."

Dirk surveyed the repair hangar. The maintenance crews were busy at work and were unlikely to notice him.

He whirled to face the sergeant in time to ward off the heavy wrench the other wielded at his head. It flew from the man's hand. Dirk quickly covered him with the captured pistol.

"Don't try that again, sergeant. I don't want to kill anybody."

"What you after?" snarled the mechanic. "You're too *yellow* to try to get your *brother* to take you in!"

"Get inside the ship," said Dirk evenly.

The man turned and might have made a move to escape had not Dirk rammed the gun into his broad back. He pulled himself through the port of the scout and made no move as Dirk followed him.

"You think I'd do that, Homer?" Dirk asked. He had once worked with the stocky mechanic on a modification of a detection system.

"What you doin' with that gun?"

"I'm going to take this ship. I'm going after Marc Dirk," he answered. "But *I'm* going to take *him!*"

Dirk lowered the pistol and threw it down.

The muscular mechanic slowly assumed a slight crouch. His fists clenched and tightened at his side as he stared at Dirk.

"Will you help me get this ship off?"

Without waiting for an answer Dirk turned his back on the man and strode to the control seat. He turned as he reached it.

"You knew Gus Rank too, didn't you?" Dirk asked.

The other man stood for a long time peering at Dirk with a mixture of hatred and bewilderment. Finally he seemed to relax ever so slightly.

"I haven't much time, Homer. Do you try that right cross you're famous for or do you call Control and tell them you're taking this ship up for a test ride?"

"I think maybe you find him," said the mechanic. "Anyway you found yourself!" He let himself out of the ship and darted for concealment among a pile of supplies.

CHAPTER V

DIRK SCARCELY was conscious of the approach of the jagged mass of frozen stone. Despite the clatter and scream of detection instruments he knew it would not touch the droning scout. That it meant the approach of death—instantaneous death in a puff of vaporized metal and stone—could not penetrate the waves of emotion that cursed through Dirk's mind.

I'm after you, Marc. You've been waiting for me. Now I'm coming.

A cloud of celestial dust enveloped the scout, fogging the viewer plate's bright image. Friction against the hull heated it to brilliant incandescence and caused the scout's emergency cooling equipment to scream. But Dirk knew it contained no permanent threat.

I'm not taking the path, Marc. You'd expect that.

The scout entered a veritible jungle of flashing asteroids. With precise, mechanical movements, Dirk avoided them. Pursuing a vector course to their orbits meant constant danger of collision. Dirk swept close enough to them to distinguish surface characteristics.

You must know that I'm coming. It's a gambit neither of us could refuse. Not and live among men.

A massive bracelet of flashing death! A bracelet of gems, woven together loosely by the force of gravity, yet a gravity so tenuous that the force of sunlight causes it to swirl and eddy, the changing configurations of bodies millions of miles removed tuggs at it. Dirk aimed the scout toward a large body, knowing it would be surrounded by relatively vacant space.

You're clever. But I know you, Marc! God, how well!

Was the base tracking him? His communicator was open. But the

squadron could not follow his path. It would be suicidal. And yet he hoped...

Marc, I'm coming in after you. Eventually they might track you down with bloodhounds. But I can find you without them.

Perhaps he should have left a message. There were some things statistics could never deduce. Not about Marc. Marc was too brilliant to confine himself to tell-tale patterns of action. His criminal mind was too wily for any calculating machine.

You outwitted the sheriff and escaped. I knew you would. Just as you outwitted father. And Jane.

The large, nearly spherical Hermes entered the range of the light telescope. An island in the asteroid field. Barren and frozen as all the rest, it nevertheless was reassuringly solid. There was a crater in its northern hemisphere. Perhaps on a tiny world like this one...

The sheriff offered me his sympathy, Marc. Warned me against doing something foolish. But sheer necessity cannot be foolish.

Dirk forced the scout into a flashing turn to avoid a concentration of bodies. At his present velocity the large distance between them narrowed to nothingness. For a time he paralleled orbits, manuevering through the asteroids by degrees. It was a waste of fuel, but inevitable.

You're ugly—monstrously ugly, Marc. You've always punished me for that. You hate me for it. But I hate you more—for Jane.

Dirk threw a communicator switch and brought it up to power. He knew he would need the limit of its range, even though he must be quite close now to the pirate's defense net. It must work.

Dirk's voice was low pitched and steady as a mechanical instrument. "I'm after you, Marc," he said. "You've been waiting for me. Now I'm coming. You found out I was coming here. You thought you stopped me. You didn't, Marc. I'm coming in to get you."

The scout fought its way through a barrier of jagged rock, narrowly missing its orbit. Dirk controlled the craft with a precision that belied his preoccupation.

"I'm not taking the path. Your fleet would soon get me. I want you to come, Marc. Come yourself and meet me. You can find the way. Come all by yourself as I am.

"You've held off the service, Marc. Just like you did the sheriff long ago. You've outwitted plenty of people, Marc. But you can't outwit me, your brother.

"You must have realized that early, Marc. When we were kids. Not being able to outwit me was hard to accept. But you found another method. It worked. It worked very well, Marc. Otherwise I'd have come sooner. But it cannot work now."

THERE WAS a sharp nerve-shattering thud against the scout's hull. Asteroid! For an instant the cabin lights dimmed, then regained a part of their brilliance. A wail of warning devices told Dirk the hull had been pierced. There was the scream of pumps and a hiss of oxygen valves. The noise continued for minutes as automatic equipment pumped molten plastic into the cavity under the hull. But finally it died down.

"Hear that, Marc? Just like before in the Everglades. Only then it was a water moccasin. Nature herself has always played your game, hasn't it? Or, rather, like the animal you are, you claimed her blind protection.

"That was another of your strengths. You outwitted us all because you *weren't human*. We expected you to respond like one of us.

"You better hurry, Marc. It wouldn't do for me to die of anoxia. You must accept the gambit. That is the only way.

Indeed there was not much time. The scout's range had been cut dras-

tically by the asteroid. Precious fuel and oxygen had siphoned into space. Electrical energy had been dissipated in repairing the wound.

Dirk's hands and arms ached at the furious movements required to avoid the asteriods. There had not been an instant of rest from the control plate. The blink of an eye might mean instant death. Instant death short of completing a mission that meant more than death...

But where was Mac? Could Dirk be wrong in his estimate of his brother's nature? Impossible. Yet only frozen and lifeless asteroids reflected the beams of his detector system.

"I'm right here, Leslie," a cool, metalic voice said, coming from Dirk's communicator. "Right here behind this *tree!*"

It was Marc Dirk. There was no mistaking the voice or the allusion to the "tree." Nor the ugly laughter that rippled through space after the words...

Dirk was conscious of the impact of the voice. It had had a paralyzing effect—the same sort of effect it had always had. Since time out of memory. The voice cut through to the very core of him. It sheared through layer upon layer of conscious decision and rational choice. It ultimately would try the very basis of Leslie Dirk's manhood. That was strikingly, instantaneously clear to him.

"I hear you, Marc. Come out so I can see you."

Dirk was almost caught by surprise. Recognizing the onrushing missile for what it was, he forced strangely hamstrung muscles to meet its deadly challenge.

"See me now, Leslie? I'd hate to kill you without your knowing who did it!"

"You ... haven't.... changed ... a...bit!" Dirk answered, forcing the scout into a maneuver. As he watched the viewer plate he saw the image of the missile split into a pattern of parts. A barrage! Each projectile drawn to him at ferocious velocity by its tiny electronic brain.

With all his will Dirk resisted the temptation to turn about and run. Stung to the depths by the effect of his brother's voice, he swung a course to meet the onrushing swarm....

CHAPTER VI

AT THE LAST possible instant, his nerves throbbing within him, Dirk skidded the scout into a sharp turn. The swarm followed him. But the suddenness of the maneuver caused one missile to overcorrect in establishing its new course. There was a brilliant flash, then a series of similar flashes that enveloped the closely spaced projectiles.

"Very good!" said the voice of the communicator. "Only a beginning, but very good. You will prove an interesting kill, my brother."

Dirk no longer trusted his own voice. He had never been able to match his brother's tongue. The weakness had been profoundly important to him as a child.

"You're very quiet," mocked the voice. "It couldn't be that..."

Dirk's missile cut the voice short. With consumate skill, apparent even in the movement of the tiny dot on Dirk's screen, Marc looped his craft and shot toward an onrushing asteroid. Swerving at the last instant, he flashed into an incredibly tight hairpin turn around the tiny world. The missile could not follow the maneuver. Losing its target it veered off harmlessly and was lost in space.

Dirk took up pursuit of the black scout, now visible in the telescope. Swerving repeatedly to avoid space mines carefully sown by his brother, he pursued the other craft relentlessly around and between asteroids. The distance between the two narrowed.

But Marc's voice betrayed no concern. "You're right in thinking I expected you. It's taken you a long time to get up nerve for this."

Dirk felt his throat tighten. He hated his lack of control over so potent a weapon. There was no denying the power of Marc over him. Was there a way of accepting it, absorbing it, neutralizing it?

The furious burst of a mine rocked Dirk in the control seat. Blinded for an instant by its brilliance, he lost sight of the other craft just long enough to lose it among a cluster of asteroids. The pirate was taking full advantage of his knowledge and experience in the Belt. Dirk frantically sought the ship. Meanwhile he was an open target for the other's missiles.

Dirk launched a pattern of small seeker rockets and maneuvered the scout into a position behind them. Until they dispersed they would offer a kind of shelter...

But the shield vanished in a jagged burst of blue flame long before any protection was close enough to go for. Dirk felt a spasm of confusion and frustration as he fought to control the blast-shaken scout.

Perhaps oxygen lack was causing his confusion. But he knew that it was hot. Hot and shaken by a realization of his own weakness, Dirk whipped the craft into a pattern of evasion to ward off a shower of small missiles. Finally he made a straight away dash for a jagged piece of stone the size of a small house. Braking the scout he achieved a jarring contact. He desperately needed time to shake his enemy's strongest weapon...

MARC'S LONG ugly laugh resonated through the tiny cabin. It carried the full potential of the man's evil strength and the man's consciousness of that strength.

Marc began a fierce bombardment of the asteroid. Protected from the vaporizing heat of the blasts, Dirk nevertheless felt the sickening concussion. It would be only a matter of time before the asterioid was jarred into rotation, bringing the scout into the full rain of death that was now pummeling stone. Did he dare make a run for it? Dirk's mind told him he could not. His soul told him he must not.

"You're sitting on the cue ball, Leslie. Watch me play billiards with you!"

Still he forced the scout to cling to the fragment of stone. Why? What power held him there? He had come to destroy Marc Dirk. Now he cowered behind a boulder.

"You aren't saying anything *now*, eh Leslie? You haven't forgotten how much you hate your brother, have you?"

"Marc..."

"You haven't forgotten *Jane*, have you Leslie. Come now, put up some fight. Remember your sweetheart, Jane?"

Leslie Dirk lost a kind of consciousness. A vast pulse of hatred swept his every nerve. In an instant he suffered all the agonies of a cruel domination he had known from time out of mind. Like a vast panorama a chain of memories swam before him, searing his soul and boiling out of him a structure of guilt and submissiveness...

The wound on his hand opened up again, a small pool of red spreading over his hand. And suddenly there was an earlier scene...

Blood! Blood and pain from a blow delivered against a hated thing. An inert form on the ground before him, its head lolling sickening to one side...

Dirk knew the lust of a fear-crazed animal for the blood of a fallen enemy. He re-lived the joy of a crime reduced now to its essential parts. And it was a crime no more.

Dirk kicked the scout away from the splintered asteroid. With sharp, unblinking eyes he caught sight of the other ship, looming large as it closed in on a cowering enemy.

"I'm on you now, Marc," he said through closed teeth. "This time you will stay dead."

The other vessel loomed large. A strange smile grew on Dirk's face. His eyes were glazed.

"You should be good at facing death by now, Marc."

"Leslie, you haven't got the guts!"

"What does it feel like the *second* time, Marc?"

"Leslie..."

Dirk felt a kind of disappointment when the other ship swerved to avoid the head-on collision. But it made no real difference to him.

"Leslie...Leslie," cried the suddenly stricken voice of the pirate.

The black ship swung into the center of the viewer.

"Wait, kid, we'll make a deal..."

Marc's evasive tactics had lost precision. It was no ruse. A final burst of energy brought the black-scout within grappling range. Dirk triggered the mechanism and the two ships were linked.

"Leslie," cried the voice of the broken pirate. "Leslie, they'll kill you. My fleet..."

DIRK TEMPORARILY blotted out the voice when he fitted the space helmet in place. Then, switching on the suit communicator, he spoke into it briefly: "I'm coming after you, Marc."

The short-lived oxygen supply of the suit invigorated him. Hand over hand he made his way along the cable. Reaching the black craft he planted a metalic boot hard on the hull and fished into the suit for an instrument.

"Open up, Marc."

"You can't get away...they're all around us now..."

"I'm coming in."

"You fool, you fool. They won't wait. They'll roast us!"

Dirk applied the tiny blue flame to the almost invisible crack delineating the port.

"They won't stop, Leslie! They figure I'm done!"

The metal chipped under the furious flame. The sudden expansion splintered its surface like glass.

"Let me get into my suit, Leslie!"

A ruse.

"I'm coming in, Marc."

Suddenly the port flew open, its lid almost pinning Dirk's hand. A barrage of wild shots from a hand weapon issued from the lock in a narrow cone. Dirk flattened himself on the hull.

"I'm coming in, Marc."

The statement produced another wild series of shots, their cone widening this time.

"You can't get in, Leslie. I'll blast you... You can't..."

"I'm coming in, Marc."

"Leslie! Here's the gun, take it. Only spare my life!"

Dirk did not move as the pistol floated out of the port. Seconds later his guess was confirmed. Another barrage of shots flew from the port, this time in a wide arc. Marc was near!

Dirk quickly snapped off the carrier wave of his communicator. He hoped it would produce a small click.

Seconds passed slowly.

"You can't get in, Leslie. You got to come through this port and I'm waiting here. Waiting until your oxygen is gone. Hear that, Leslie, you're not coming in. Never. I can wait, Leslie...

But he did not.

"So I got you, Leslie. You chump, I got you!"

Slowly the helmet emerged. In another instant he might see Dirk. But Dirk rammed the blue flame against the heavy transparent helmet before that instant passed.

Escaping oxygen caused the instrument to flare brilliantly.

Near collapse from lack of oxygen, Dirk scarcely heard the voice on the pirate ship's communicator.

"...go home, Captain Dirk. Your job is finished. The rest is our show!"

(*please turn to page* 130)

MARVEL SCIENCE-FICTION QUIZ

by The Editors **(Science For The Future Man)**

Naturally, science and science-fiction go hand in hand. Not a few of the writers of science-fiction are scientists taking a busman's holiday to entertain you—and themselves. On the other hand, although you may read science-fiction purely for entertainment, you're still garnering a knowledge of science from it. The following quiz is a case in point. A score of 25 would be par for the average layman; the science-fictionist's average should be 50. 85 really places you in the upper brackets! Five points for each correct answer....

PART I

Let's limber-up with some multiple choice questions. One answer only completes each of the following statements:

1. A meson is (a) a type of boulder found near the site of an extinct volcano; (b) a sub-atomic particle; (c) a basalt plateau.
2. The planet Vulcan (a) plunged into the sun's corona several months after discovery; (b) is too close to the sun to be seen, except at rare intervals; (c) was most probably the product of eyestrain.
3. To obtain a rare earth, you would have to (a) journey to Tibet or Mongolia; (b) subject certain salts to tremendous pressure; (c) perform ion exchanges.
4. The sun is (a) a giant star; (b) a main sequence star; (c) a dwarf star.
5. You would most likely take ambergris (a) from a whale to a perfume factory; (b) from a mine to a chemical lab; (c) from a chemical lab to an atomic pile.

PART II

Each question is worth five points in this section. Answers should be brief.

6. What is the blood-type known as "universal doner"?
7. One planet can be seen with the unaided eye and yet was never discovered by the ancients. Which one is it?
8. Despite the fact that the near-vacuum of space a million miles from Earth is several hundred degrees below zero Fahrenheit, the first spaceship will probably need a cooling system out there. Why?
9. Why is a mixture of nitric acid and hydrochloric acid called *aqua regia*?
10. What element is most abundant in the Earth's atmosphere?

PART III

The following statements are either true or false.

11. Di-hydrogen oxide (HOH) is also known as water.
12. No one has yet been able to photograph an atom.
13. The atomic bomb would more properly be called the electron bomb.
14. The whale is the largest animal that ever lived.

PART IV

Find the item in the second column which matches each item in the first (do not use any item from column two more than once).

15. Eando Binder
16. "Farewell to the Master"
17. Philip Latham
18. "Hard Luck Diggings"
19. John Carstairs
20. Hugo Gernsback

a. Science-fiction pen-name for famous astronomer.
b. Responsible for the first science-fiction magazine.
c. Novel of mining on Jupiter.
d. Frank B. Long's detective of the future.
e. Science fiction short story contracted for by 20th Century Fox.
f. Story of a future earth when man is no more.
g. "The Day the Earth Stood Still"
h. Famous for robot character.

(please turn to page 81 for answers)

RULES OF THE GAME

by MILTON LESSER

PHIL WAGGED a finger severely in front of his wife's face. "Is Saafiska complaining?"

"No," Georgia said. "She's not. But I'm not a miniature dragon with tattoos all over my armor plate—if you'll pardon me, Saafiska."

Saafiska grinned, showed three rows of very black teeth in her silver face. "That's all right, my dear. You look like a sickly white slug to me, but I think you have a charming mind."

"Thank you very much."

"Stop behaving like a couple of alley cats," Phil told them. "Or—"

Jaabic took the tiny blow-torch away from the green-gray plates on his right biceps. He had partially completed a tri-color replica of the abstract design where Saafiska's navel would have been; had Saafiska been endowed with a navel.

"You like it?" Jaabic demanded, parading his arm around like a painting.

"Well—" Georgia began politely.

"Never mind, Georgia. It isn't finished, anyway. Now, what's all the trouble?"

"Well, this big boob here," Georgia pointed accusingly at her husband, "insists on entering us in the Games."

Phil smiled. "I already have. And one of the rules of the Games happens to be this: you can't withdraw once you've entered. So it's too late to turn back now, and we're waiting for clearance on Qulpin. Saafiska thought it was a good idea—you've got a nice live-wire wife there, Jaabic."

"Think so, eh? We spent two months in prison on Pharno because she insisted the mayor of Shard was a robot. Tried to oil him to prove it. We were chased out of Nin on the planet Shikash for— I'd better tell you this one privately some time, Phil."

"So, okay. Saafiska likes to have fun, gets you into trouble occasionally. What's all this got to do with entering the Games?"

Jaabic shrugged. "As they say on your planet, we won't spill sour milk back. You have entered us and we cannot withdraw. But the Asha-akon are a strange complex of peoples. We don't even call them a culture, you'll notice, because they're not integrated the way a culture should be. The only point of integration is the Games—and they come from all over the Asha-akon Globular to enter, roughly, every ten of your years."

Phil shook his head deprecatingly. "I know all that. I also know of rumors about one of my own planeteers, an Earthman, who runs a tourist shuttle to Qulpin for the Games."

"See?" Georgia demanded. "This was the secret vacation spot he was taking us to all along. This—Asha-akon phooey!"

Jaabic's three rows of black teeth made clicking noises. "You should have asked me, Phil. Did you at least let any government agency know your plans, the Watchers perhaps?"

"Nope. Not a soul. Should I have?"

"Hmm, hmm. You have really burned your breeches behind you, then. Did you know that sometimes the Games last ten of your years, Phil?"

"Ten years! I figured a couple of weeks here on Qulpin—"

THE EARTH CREATURES WANTED TO PLAY? OKAY . .



That's right, the one who won the Games got Phil's wife. No, there was nothing an Earthman could do about it. This was Asha-akon Globular, after all

Something went "beep, beep, beep!" over and over again on the dashboard.

"Clearance!" Saafiska cried brightly. "We can planet-fall on Qulpin."

"Well, good for us," Georgia said. "I haven't got a thing better to do than spend ten years of my life here. Jaabic, what happens if you leave early?"

"Oh, you can't. It's the rules of the Game. You've got to stay until the Games are concluded."

"Well, what would happen if you left?"

"You can't, that's all." Jaabic snapped on his blow torch again, motioned Saafiska to stand up. "There, let me have more light on your torso." He began to melt the armor on his right arm.

* * *

"ISN'T IT splendid?" Saafiska said. "You and Phil can breathe the air of Qulpin. Jaabic and myself, of course, don't have to breathe anything."

"What's so splendid about it?" Georgia asked. "Everyone in the galaxy who breathes, breathes air that's good for us. For those that don't have to breathe, naturally it doesn't matter."

"But I mean here in the Asha-akon Globular, on Qulpin."

"Still the same galaxy, Saafiska. Jaabic, must your wife be so naive?"

They had landed in shadow, and the night sky of Qulpin was something to see. Qulpin stood near the center of the Asha-akon Globular,

. . . . INFELICITOUS NOVELET! ★ ★ ★

where stellar distances were more nearly planetary, and a hundred thousand nearby stars shone brightly in the Qulpin sky.

Over a hill in the distance they could see the lights of a city. Georgia looked a little doubtful. "Do we wait until morning?"

They signified this city and we missed it by two, three miles. All we got to do is walk."

"Walk, nothing." Georgia told him "Why don't we take the ship?"

"Can't," said Jaabic. "Rules of the Game, Georgia."

"Oh, rules be hanged! We're taking the ship. You keep talking like we'll be spanked or something if we don't obey the rules. Well, I don't feel like walking."

Jaabic's three shiny rows of teeth clicked. "She's as bad as Saafiska, in a different way. Saafiska will believe everything you tell her, Georgia will believe nothing. Georgia, I think, will fare worse in the Asha-akon Games."

Phil watched his wife walk jauntily toward the little cruiser, pouting. Then, quite abruptly, Georgia sat down on the ground, rubbing the side of her head.

Phil reached her in half a dozen big bounds. "What happened to you, honey?"

"Don't you 'honey' me, Phil Potter! You probably knew that was going to happen."

"Knew what was going to happen?" Phil echoed.

"Well, if you didn't, then Jaabic did."

"No," said Jaabic, who had reached them, "I didn't know what would happen. But I knew something would. You see, as I told you, you can't violate the rules. Evidently they've put up some sort of a force-field around the ship. We can't return to it until the Games are over. You increase the molecular cohesion in air, and it doesn't behave like air—but if this had been a sensible planet like my own Shiyka which has no atmosphere to speak of, it couldn't have happened."

Phil reached out an exploring hand beyond where Georgia stood rubbing her ear and nodding ruefully as Saafiska chided her. Something stood in his way—not warm, not cold, certainly not visible, but a perfectly effective wall.

Georgia smiled for the first time since they had landed. "Like you say, I guess we walk."

Jaabic's long armored neck wagged back and forth, which was the nearest he could come to shaking his head. "It's no longer necessary, Georgia. Here comes our reception committee."

A dozen assorted creatures paraded toward them over the hill, in single file. Saafiska's black teeth clicked excitedly. "See? Some are atmosphere people and some are not, some are soft and mushy and some are hard like Shiykans. But of course, not quite so hard. Jaabic says we're the hardest people in the galaxy."

Jaabic confided, "She likes to blow her own nose, my Saafiska."

"You mean horn," Georgia told him.

WHEN THE leader stood perhaps two dozen paces away, the parade came to a halt. The leader was a queer duck, a triangular prism set on stilts, and he looked every bit as hard as the Shiykans, but Phil didn't tell this to Saafiska. The leader pressed an appendage to his side and a green light winked aglow atop his pyramid-body.

The green light, Phil knew, was universal. It meant, in effect, "You name the language, I can speak it. But let's not waste time with me trying to guess where you're from. Talk!"

Phil cleared his throat. "I'm Phil Potter of Earth, this is Georgia Ann Potter, these are Jaabic and Saafiska Farnaq of Shiyka...."

A maw opened in the pyramid. "You speak Hurth. But how nice sur-

prise, because recently have I learned to speak Hurth. You've been speaking Hurth long?"

"All my life. I was born on Earth, my wife too."

"Imagine that! Hurths! I have a friend from Hurth, that's what I have."

Georgia whispered, "Well, good for him. What does he want us to do, turn cartwheels?"

"Quiet, hon. I'd like to meet his friend from 'Hurth'. Maybe the guy can get us off Qulpin."

"How very nice indeed," the pyramid was saying. "I now have two new friends from Hurth and two from Shiyka as well. I have so much."

"Notice," said Jaabic, "that he keeps stressing ownership. Very possessive creature, and it might prove typical of the entire Asha-akon complex. Interesting."

Phil wanted to ask a question, but now he saw that the pyramid's stilt-like legs had carried it back down toward the end of the line of twelve, and the next creature was approaching. "Hey, wait a minute!" Phil called.

The pyramid turned. "You wanted me?"

"Sure did. I'd like to meet your friend from Earth."

"If he's taken you here on his tour, then you have already met him. He runs his tour from outside the Asha-akon Globular, you know—the only regularly scheduled one."

"No. We didn't come on any tour. We came alone."

"And if he did not take you here on his tour," the pyramid chose to ignore the fact that Phil had spoken, "you have no need for intercourse with him, social or business. He is my friend, anyway, as I have said." The creature turned again and stalked to the end of the line, but by the time it had finished speaking its voice had become very shrill.

Phil shrugged wearily.

"He gave you a regular tongue-smashing," said Jaabic, who had no tongue at all. "Yes, possessive people—and remember, you must follow the rules."

Creature number two was big and round and furry, an atmosphere being with a pelt of rich green.

"Distasteful looking thing," observed Saafiska. "Mushy."

THE CREATURE regarded Georgia out of deep, liquid brown, soulful eyes—ambled closer.

"It's cute!" Georgia cried, extending a hand in welcome.

Forward shuffled the furry thing on a score of tiny legs, reached Georgia's arm, crawled on it, up it, hovered inches from Georgia's face, looking into her eyes. It all seemed ridiculous to Phil; the thing was as big around as a good-sized chair, yet all the little legs seemed to come together at one spot and perch on Georgia's shoulder.

Phil appealed to Jaabic. "Can't we do anything?"

Said Saafiska, "Ooo! How can Georgia stand it?"

"Intriguing!" This from Georgia. "I can hardly feel it."

Phil came forward ominously. Let that creature paw anything it wanted, but not his wife. Rules of the game be damned.

Coolly, the furry thing surveyed him and dropped down from Georgia's shoulder. The legs seemed to disappear and it rolled back down the line now, making whistling noises. It didn't stop until it had reached the pyramid-creature, a couple of dozen paces away, and the two appeared to be in earnest conversation. Pyramid used a language they could not understand and furry thing continued to whistle.

Presently the two returned, Pyramid on its stilt-like legs, furry thing still rolling. Said the former:

"Boorkl-san of the Selections Committee approves of Georgia Potter of Hurth. The Games being this year on Qulpin, Boorkl-san, a Qulpinian, is

naturally head of the Selections Committee."

"Naturally," said Saafiska, but Boorkl-san drowned her out with more whistling.

"Just what," Jaabic wanted to know, "does he select?"

Phil had a growing feeling that things were not going quite right, things were going very bad indeed....

"What does he select? What does he—but of course. You are from outside the Asha-akon Globular. Sometimes my friends can be the most disappointing creatures. Boorkl-san selects the booty, since he is on the Selections Committee."

"Obviously," said Saafiska.

Pyramid ignored her. "Each Games the committee selects something unique and hence fabulously expensive.

"Boorkl-san has found his booty," Pyramid continued. "Who wins the Asha-akon Games, wins Georgia Potter, only soft bipedal thing feminine, only female of Hurth in all Asha-akon. Think of the money she'd bring on the open market as a curio—not to mention the, uh, closed market. Boorkl-san owns genius."

Declared Jaabic, "Notice the use of the word 'owns'. As I've said, possessive."

"The hell with that!" Phil stormed. "Did you hear what he said about Georgia? My wife's not going to be treasure trove for anyone—even here in Asha-akon Globular."

"She's not much of a prize," said Saafiska. "Even if we win the Games, all we get is Georgia...."

"Isn't anyone going to ask for my views on all this? I can just say no, can't I?" Georgia demanded.

Jaabic's neck wagged. "You can't. The rules, remember? If you're it, you're it." His three rows of teeth clicked.

THE WHISTLING ball of green fur named Boorkl-san signaled two of the creatures behind Pyramid. They came forward puffing laboriously, looking like animated broomsticks with arms and legs. As they approached Georgia she hollered and pushed out with both arms, sending one stick-like creature spinning away in each direction.

"My friend," said Pyramid, "why are you doing that? You are booty."

"Booty-shmooty! If you think I'm going with those things, you're crazy."

Pyramid turned and clucked some sounds behind him, and half a dozen of Boorkl-san's furry companions came mincing forward on their tiny legs. Literally, they swarmed all over Georgia, and before Phil knew quite what was happening, one of them had produced a rope. Georgia soon found herself, neatly trussed, in a heap upon the ground.

Boorkl-san squatted, his score of tiny legs tucked in under him, on Georgia's breast, and his green fur tickled Georgia under the chin. There were tears of indignation in her eyes, but Georgia began to laugh.

"Why did she resist if she finds it amusing?" Saafiska wanted to know.

Jaabic's neck shook. "No, my dear; it's just that when an atmosphere creature is thus stimulated, it laughs."

Said Pyramid, "Boorkl-san wants to know if that sound indicates pleasure or pain. I would say it might be a combination."

Phil slammed fist against palm. "Look, I don't care what Boork-what's-his-name wants to know. I want my wife released. Now."

"But my friend, she's booty. I thought I had made that clear."

"You can't talk to them," Phil appealed to Jaabic. "They just don't think along the same lines. So what can you do?"

"Nothing. We'd better win the Games, that's all. The winner gets Georgia."

"Hmm," Saafiska considered. "Hmm."

Phil crouched again and gripped the fur of Boorkl-san's back in his

hand, lifting the creature away from Georgia. Georgia began to cry.

"Better put Boorkl-san down again," suggested Saafiska.

Phil didn't stop to explain that that wouldn't help. He flung his hand out in a wide motion, intending to throw the incredibly light Boorkl-san far away. But Boorkl-san's twenty tiny legs clung to his fingers, and by his whistling, Boorkl-san seemed to be enjoying the ride.

Phil shook his fingers. He made elaborate motions with his arm. He tugged with the fingers of his other hand.

Boorkl-san clung like glue.

Pyramid was clucking again, and the two stick-things scurried back. They began to carry Georgia up and over the hill, beyond which shone the light of the city. The nine other creatures, including Pyramid, turned to follow, and Phil, Boorkl-san clinging to his hand, brought up the rear.

"Put her down!" he shouted.

Pyramid made noises. The stick things dropped Georgia, who yelped, and proceeded to drag her across the rocky ground.

"Stop it!" cried Phil. "Pick her up."

Pyramid turned. "That is what we were doing in the first place." Georgia was picked up again.

Phil brandished Boorkl-san furiously overhead, shaking his hidden fist. He'd had about enough, and now he ignored Jaabic's warning for caution. Caution nothing, they were kidnapping his wife, that's what they were doing! Phil lashed out with his free fist and struck Pyramid just below his apex. Phil howled.

"He must have broken a digit or two," Jaabic observed.

Pyramid stalked away after the others, Phil stumbling after him, blowing on the fingers of his right hand. When it was apparent that Phil was gaining, Pyramid clucked something at Boorkl-san, and the ball of fur obligingly scurried down Phil's arm, down his torso, down his left thigh. Boorki-san lodged just above Phil's left ankle, between his legs, and his girth made it impossible for Phil to walk, except in an awkward, bow-legged position.

He tried to go on, but he tripped over an outcropping of rock. He lay there panting, lungs burning. The knuckles of his right hand were scraped and bloody. He felt weak and sick, and tears of helpless rage stung his eyes. He turned over on his right side, kicked out with his left leg and poised it high aloft, intending to swing it down hard and crush Boorkl-san against the rocks. But at the last moment Boorkl-san loosed himself and scurried off toward the hill, whistling. With a thud, Phil's leg came down, and lances of pain coursed up the length of his body. He heard Georgia calling him, but her voice grew fainter. Soon he didn't hear it at all.

DAWN CAME up over the horizon, and dawn turned out to be bright blue, the early morning rays parching Phil's skin.

"How do you feel now?" Jaabic demanded.

"Lousy, thanks. A fine couple of friends you turned out to be." Two knuckles on his right hand had swelled during the night, and now they throbbed dully with pain. He couldn't move them. Not so stiff was his left leg, but it hurt him more.

"That Boorkl-san made a flunky out of you," said Jaabic.

"Monkey," Phil said automatically, but that made him think of Georgia, who would have offered the correction a lot faster. There had been a lot of activity in Qulpin's night sky, and one of those ships could have born Georgia to some unknown corner of the planet. How—and where—on Qulpin could he hope to find her?

"Seriously," Jaabic's rasping voice sounded almost fatherly, "the rules of the game say that Boorkl-san, as chaircreature of the selections committee, was to select the prize for the Games. He selected Georgia, and

quite legally here on Qulpin, they took her. What could we do?"

"You could have helped me fight, that's what."

"You never asked us," said Saafiska, idly powdering a good-sized stone between the fingers of her fore-limb.

Jaabic clicked his teeth. "It wouldn't have helped. They'd have had a way to subdue us—but now at least Saafiska and I are uninjured, and we can help you win the Games."

"You crazy? Who can think of winning the Games at a time like this? I want Georgia."

"And that's the way you'll get her—by winning the Games."

"The devil you say. I could go to the Watchers and report this whole thing—"

"How? Our ship is grounded for the duration. So are all spaceships on Qulpin, now that all the contestants have arrived. How could you even get to the Watchers?"

"Well, I'll find a way. I'll find a ship. I'll—"

"Even if you could, the Watchers would be sympathetic, Phil, but beyond that I don't think they'd offer you much help. Their jurisdiction doesn't extend into the Asha-akon Globular, you know."

"Yeah," Phil said glumly. "Yeah."

"So—perk up, perk up. We came here to win the Asha-akon Games, and that is precisely what we'll do. You had in mind a treasure as your reward. Is Georgia treasure enough?"

"Yes, but—but this is different. If we didn't win, so what? That's what I thought, so what. Only now we have to win, and I see how stupid it is. We'll be competing against creatures who know the culture inside-out—we're three aliens, Jaabic. Aliens, with alien ignorance of custom and law, of geography, of language, even of your damned rules. We don't stand a chance in these Games. We know about as much of the culture as Saafiska knows about calculus."

"No we don't," said Saafiska. "I concentrated in mathematics at the Universiy of Ii, on Brulg. Ask Jaabic."

"Okay, okay. S— —"

JAABIC'S three rows of very black teeth spread in a grin. "Consider, Phil: that pyramid-thing speaks your language, confirms your rumor of an Earthman here in the Asha-akon Globular, here on Qulpin. He must, at least in a limited sense, understand the culture. He certainly understands the Games. If we find him, he should be able to help."

Phil jumped up, then winced as too much of his weight was concentrated on his left foot. Jaabic had a point there, of course. His fellow planeteer here on Qulpin should be able to give him the lowdown. You can comprehend only in terms of familiar, and to see things through the eyes of an alien you'd first have to know the alien's background. But the Earthman who ran a shuttle to the Asha-akon Globular was not an alien, and Phil shouted with enthusiasm.

He hobbled about, testing his leg. It felt like someone was hammering at it with a sledge, but he could walk. Up over the hill they went, and beyond it lay a broad expanse of marshland spotted with sparse, ugly vegetation. Through this led a road, vaguely azure in the blue light. Even from this distance Phil could make out the round low buildings of the city.

"How will we find this planeteer of yours?" demanded Saafiska.

Phil frowned. They walked on a broad avenue within the city, and on all sides of them squatted the round dwellings of Boorki-san's fellow Qulpinians. Crowds thronged the avenue—the people of the Asha-akon Globular, and every third one only was a round furry ball of green. The creatures Phil saw were as varied as those of the galaxy itself, hence no one but an Asha-akonian anthropologist would have looked twice at Jaabic, Saafiska and Phil. On the other hand, Saafiska's question was a good one: just how would they go about finding a lone Earthman?

"Don't let that worry you," said Jaabic. "See the entrances to those buildings? An Earthman could get in, all right, but he'd have some trouble. If he lived here permanently, that wouldn't suit him at all. How would you like to crawl on your hands and knees, maybe slither on your belly, every time you wanted to enter? So we'll know we've arrived when we find a different structure. The city isn't very big."

"There's one! There's one!" This was Saafiska, and without waiting for a comment, she plodded over to a hemisphere somewhat larger than the rest. She crouched and banged on the door, and as it opened Phil caught a quick glimpse of one of Boorkl-san's furry green brothers.

"It's Qulpinian," Jaabic said wearily, but Saafiska didn't hear him. Flat on the ground now, she shouldered in, her armored and designed posterior presenting a strange sight.

Then she got stuck. The Shiykans are built wider at the pelvic region than at the shoulders, and Saafiska could only slither so far. Her armored legs pounded the ground and she was shouting something, but her body filled the entrance too thoroughly and even Jaabic couldn't interpret the sounds which emerged.

A CRACK appeared above the doorway and plaster powdered down on Saafiska, covering the armor of her posterior with a fine white dust. A crowd gathered to watch.

Said Jaabic, "It would serve her right if we left her here." But he bent over and tugged at his wife's legs. He grunted. "Hmm, she's really stuck."

The crack in the wall had zig-zagged up, extended in a jagged line from doorway to roof. Little chunks of plaster began to chip off and fall and Phil could hear Saafiska's yelling quite clearly this time. Another sound distracted him—the ringing of bells deep and brazen. Soon a vehicle of sorts whisked up the avenue and stopped abruptly, scant yards from Saafiska's drumming legs. Three fur-balls got out, but they were purple. Evidently the color brought some authority with it, because the crowd backed away respectfully as the three newcomers surveyed the scene with their deep soulful eyes, whistling shrilly at one another.

One of them scrambled up Jaabic's back and perched on his shoulder, whistling. It didn't stop whistling until Jaabic got the idea and backed away. He looked at Phil helplessly. "Maybe they can get her out without bringing the building down on those fur-things inside."

Two of the fur-balls scurried back to their vehicle, emerging presently with a simple tube of metal. This they toted back to the doorway, directing it just to the left of Saafiska's rump and a pressuring stream of burning gas speared into the wall.

"Stop—that's hot!" Jaabic cried.

Phil placed a hand on his shoulder, said: "Relax. She can take it." But he withdrew his hand quickly when the fur-ball on Jaabic's head looked at it.

"I know, I know," Jaabic told him. "But if they aren't careful they'll melt the designs. It takes a long time, a long—*argh!* Look at those unskilled oafs."

The doorway had been widened sufficiently for Saafiska to withdraw, albeit awkwardly. "I thought you said an Earthman would be there," she wailed.

Jaabic's neck wagged. "I said in a building of different structure.... Never mind, never mind! Just look at you. Look at you!" His teeth clicked. "Turn around."

Saafiska did a slow pirouette. Ventrally, everything seemed fine, but her lateral and dorsal regions were a mess. Designs had disappeared, colors had run together; what looked like dry flaky mud covered most of Saafiska.

Wagging his head sadly, Jaabic turned away.

ABRUPTLY, Phil was aware that they weren't through with the situation yet. For the moment he had forgotten the three purple fur-balls, but they stood clustered together now, whistling. Two pairs of cautious eyes peeped out from within the blasted doorway, then a troup of green fur-balls emerged. Behind them came Pyramid—and since Phil had seen only one stilt-legged triangular prism here on Qulpin, he could assume quite reasonably that this was the same.

Pyramid's maw opened. "So—Hurth's new gift to the Asha-akon Globular, and our two gifts from Shiyka." Pyramid's apex just did fit through the doorway, but it had always been wide enough for him since his base was considerably narrower than Saafiska's pelvic region. "But this is trouble, friends."

"What do you mean, trouble?" said Phil. "We're sorry about the door. What will Boorkl-san's fellows take as payment?"

"Fellows? Boorkl-san's fellows? You mean Boorkl-san himself."

Phil said something about not being able to tell the fur-balls apart, and he realized that one of the green things that emerged before Pyramid had been the chaircreature of the committee which had selected Georgia.

"Quite a coincidence," said Saafiska. "Stumbling on them like this."

But Jaabic's head wagged. "No coincidence at all. You picked the largest building you could find—quite natural it should be headquarters for the Games, most important event in the Asha-akon Globular, not to mention here on Qulpin." He frowned. "You realize it will take weeks to paint you again. Weeks—*if* I can ever duplicate it."

Pyramid waited politely until Jaabic had finished, then addressed the three of them: "As I have said, trouble. Much trouble."

Phil would have preferred anything to what appeared to be a growing maze of Asha-akon red tape. They had come almost no distance at all, and a delay now might really turn their search for Georgia into a fiasco....

"You have broken Boorkl-san's door, the very door to his home. You are my friend and I am sure you are Boorkl-san's friend, yet Boorkl-san will demand retaliation, as is his right."

"He's had his retaliation," said Jaabic. "Look at what's been done to Saafiska's armor."

"That is nothing. He'll want retaliation in kind. You have a door?"

"Of course," Saafiska said. "We have a door to our spaceship."

"Then it is that which Boorkl-san will destroy."

SOMETIME, Phil knew, Saafiska's simple statements of fact would go too far. Asha-akonian semantics might not have considered one door as the equivalent of the other, but Saafiska, innocently enough, had declared them as such. If the airlock of their ship were destroyed, there'd be no leaving Qulpin, ever.

Jaabic's neck wagged, and he looked darkly at Saafiska. But he said the one word, "When?"

"As soon as possible, naturally. It is only a short distance to your door. Today, I would say."

"Uh-uh." Phil shook his head. "Rules of the game have put a force-field around the ship for the duration. Right?"

"Right," agreed Pyramid.

Phil smiled. Bless those rules—you could use them to your own advantage, too. "Then Boorkl-san won't be able to do anything about the door until after the Games are over. He can worry about it then."

"What you say is true, Hurth. He can do it then. As soon as the Games are concluded, Boorkl-san will destroy your door. But he will not worry about it, he will destroy it."

"That will be fine," said Saafiska.

"I am glad you approve, but what will you want done to Boorkl-san?"

"Done to him? Why ever should I want anything done to him?"

"Your Jaabic mentions ruined armor. It was ruined because it got caught in Boorkl-san's door. What will you have done to Boorkl-san?"

Jaabic's artistic temperament flared. "Yes. Yes! We could have his fur shorn, clip it, cut it, have it pulled out. We could—"

Phil spun Jaabic around and glared at him. "Hold on. Just hold on. Remember Georgia? My wife? We're looking for her."

Jaabic seemed hurt. "All right, Phil. I only thought what's fair is fair—"

Phil turned to Pyramid. "Yesterday you spoke of your other friend from Earth. Can you take us to him?"

"No. He is a busy person, my friend from Hurth, and if he has any time left for little social nothings, it will be with me, because I would like him to teach me the ways of the world outside the Asha-akon Globular."

"Who said it was a little social nothing we wanted to see him about? It happens to be a matter of life and death. It's—"

"Whose life and whose death? All these things must be strictly recorded, particularly during the Games."

Said Jaabic, "That is just an idiot of speech—"

"Idiom!" Pyramid's voice was severe.

"You too, eh? Well, no matter. It means, extremely important. It has to do with the Games. Look: you are an official of the Games, correct?"

"I am Brxnapitucktt of Oo."

"That's uh, nice," Saafiska observed, but Phil knew that something about the name and planet would have been self-evident to them, had they been natives of the Asha-akon Globular. Apparently it made Pyramid an official of the highest order.

"And," Jaabic drove his point home, "it is not a rule of the game for an official to interfere in any way with the contestants, is it?"

"It is not."

"Precisely. But you will be hindering us if you do not take us to Phil's planeteer, your friend from Earth."

For what seemed a long while, Pyramid considered. His maw opened only long enough for the word "yes" to spill out, then he was addressing the three purple fur-balls in their whistling language. In a moment the three scurried to their vehicle and commenced taking all sorts of junk from it.

Pyramid said, "We can use that. Come, get in."

They soon were gliding smoothly along and while their heavy car didn't break any speed records even by Qulpinian standards, still it was a lot faster than walking.

THEY HAD guessed correctly. The vehicle stopped outside a large rectangular building, obviously a misfit here on Qulpin. A fat jovial man met them at the door, dressed in a white linen suit and mopping his forehead against the sultry heat of the blue sun.

"How the hell did you get here?" he said, extending a pudgy hand. "Been here thirty years myself. Don't look it, eh? Business stinks, didn't get a single tourist for the Games this time, but how the hell did you get here? Wait a minute, wait a minute! I heard of a girl from Earth being booty this time. Any truth to it? She a member of your party? How'd you get here?"

"Later," Phil told him. "We'd like to talk to you alone."

After Pyramid had gone, a little doubtfully:

"Now, then, what's so secret? What did you want to talk about? How'd you get here? But come on in—I'm sorry; been so long since I've entertained. Brandy?—hah-hah, I'm kidding. Got no brandy. Got nothing but this Qulpinian rotgut. It'd make your eyes pop right out of their sockets, but you might as well have some because it's all I've got. Before I forget, my name's Jessup, Jennings Jessup.

"Where'd you get the robots? Robots shaped like dragons, hah-hah."

"We are not robots," Jaabic said coldly. "We are of Shiyka, and Shiyka's civilization was using nuclear fis-

sion before your ancestors climbed down from their trees."

Jessup blanched. "Sorry. How was I to know? But nothing will surprise me in the Asha-akon Globular, neighbors."

"We are not of the Globular, but of the galaxy itself. You call our star Deneb."

"Could be, could be. Never been out Deneb way for one reason or another. Never had the time. Been busy all my life, a man of action, that's me. How'd you say you got here?"

"My wife Georgia is booty for the Games," Phil began, and then he told Jessup the whole story while the fat man poured himself Qulpinian liquor from what looked like an earthenware jug.

WHEN HE had finished, Jessup leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar. He puffed thoughtfully at the ceiling, said: "Your wife pretty?"

"I think so."

"Too bad I can't enter the Games myself this year. Pretty, eh?" Phil advanced on him menacingly, but Jessup held up a soft hand. "Hah, hah—I was only kidding. Joshing, you know. Say, is there a war in the galaxy or something? Why in hell I got no tourists I'll never know. I'll bet this whole mess wouldn't have happened if you'd come with Jennings Jessup's ship."

Jaabic paced back and forth, sat down in a chair which creaked ominously under his weight. "You've said you can't enter the Games, Jessup. Why can't you?"

"Got a soft job here, that's why. I'm on the planning committee, that's why. I helped decide in advance where the booty would be kept, that's why."

"Then all you have to do is tell us!" Saafiska said brightly.

"You want to have me killed, sir?"

"She is a woman," Jaahic told him.

"Madam, then. But how was I to know? At any rate, I can't tell you. Just how much do you know about the Asha-akon Glohular? Not much, if you expected me to tell you—"

"He talks too much," said Saafiska, clicking her teeth.

Phil supposed they could use coercion. He could picture Jaahic or Saafiska working over Jennings Jessup, and while it wasn't a very pretty sight, it certainly was a comforting one. Still, he'd much rather have it otherwise: learning where Georgia was and actually freeing her might be two entirely different matters. And Jennings Jessup was a familiar enough figure here under the blue Qulpinian sun, to be useful.

Phil found himself taking a rather cold-blooded attitude toward the man and at first it surprised him. Jessup was an Earthman here half way across the galaxy. A planeteer, yes—but that hardly mattered with Georgia in the balance, and he knew he'd cheerfully suggest that Jaabic break the man's neck if he thought it would help.

"Consider my position," Jessup was saying. "I'm an alien here on Qulpin, just like you—only I have a nice soft job which I intend to keep. You certainly don't blame me?"

Phil shook his head. "Of course not. Go on."

"Well, it's this Asha-akon Globular. Strange place, Potter. Never had any intercourse to speak of with the rest of the galaxy. That means a great deal, means that the culture grew up all by itself. Isolated. Know what a hermit can be like, Potter? Mighty ornery. Mighty peculiar. And mighty set in his ways. You give a hermit a problem. Any problem. What happens? He'll solve it different, that's what. He'll be meeting a challenge without tradition to lead the way, and starting from scratch his solution will be peculiar as hell.

"The Asha-akon Glohular is your hermit of the galaxy, Potter. No intercourse with other cultures—"

"What's all this got to do with—"

"I'm coming to it. If one of your societies out in the galaxy was faced with over-population, what would it do?"

"Why, it might expand. It would colonize, spread out."

"What if it couldn't? Here in the Globular, there are surprisingly few atmosphere worlds, but there are only a handful of non-atmosphere peoples. They've just got no place to go. What would your culture do then?"

"It might establish rigid birth-control. I guess that would be the only way. There are instances of it in the galaxy, too."

"Well, the Asha-akon societies solved that problem in a different way. Effective, Potter. But peculiar. And Lord knows this Globular is over-populated. Distances between the stars here are almost planetary, so it was a long time before they developed a really sound space-drive. When they got it, their limited tradition was already set. And for one reason or another they never thought of birth control. Know what happened?"

PHIL SHOOK his head.

"You seen any kids around?" Jessup demanded. "Small fur-puffs, junion-sized stickmen—anything?"

"No-o," Phil said. In spite of himself, he was interested. Now that Jessup had mentioned it, he realized for the first time that he had seen no children—if you could call small-sized fur-balls and the like, children.

"Reason is simple. They're all kept together in a big compound just down the street from here. It's the same way on every Asha-akon planet."

Saafiska's teeth clicked shut loudly, and Phil realized with some surprise that her motherly instinct must resent this. He had never considered a Shiykan woman—whose young hatched from eggs—to have one. Then perhaps it had to do with intelligence rather than some fortuitous mammalian circumstances? Right now Saafiska seemed, like any indignant potential mother.

"Awful place," Jessup confided. "Like a pen. They're all herded together there, thrown scraps of food a couple of times a day. They're cold in the winter—no heat; they're hot in the summer, given just enough water to survive. Only the strongest do, something like one out of seven, I think. Works the same as birth-control, all right.

"But there's another result. Those kids never own anything. They even have to fight for food, because, like I said, it's just thrown at them. They've got no security, no love, no property—nothing."

Saafiska was making growling noises, deep in her throat.

"Suddenly they're thrust out on the world and they find that if they work hard enough they can own a home, a spacegig, cattle, jewelry—you name it. Same as anyone else can own. Result: they get possessive as hell."

"I told you!" Jaabic's voice was triumphant.

"You can't imagine just how much property matters to them. A puff-ball can commit murder. If he's got a reason, he'll get off with a fine. Hell, it's just like more birth-control, anyway. But let him steal anything and his goose is cooked. Or let him destroy property: his own property is either forfeit or destroyed."

Said Saafiska, "I'm more worried about those poor kids."

"Damn it," said Phil. "I'm even *more* worried about Georgia!"

"Well," Jessup said, "that brings us to the Games, and your wife. But consider. The Games are their big event. Except for the Committee and the officials, no one knows where the booty is. They all know they want it. Possession again, only here the competition reaches fever pitch, because the Games are so important. If you win, not only do you get the booty, but you're also little less than a god after that.

"Now, Potter, about your wife. Yeah, I know where she is. Ingenious hiding place—really ingenious. But I can't tell you. If they ever found out, I'd be as good as dead. Hell, maybe

I'm not as possessive as the natives of the Globular. But I take a great deal of pride in one of my possessions, and and I'll fight for it, too."

"What's that?" Jaabic demanded.

"My life."

A COUPLE of fur-balls scurried in, dragging trays of food and drink across the floor. Phil suddenly realized how hungry he was—they hadn't eaten since they left the ship, and that seemed a long long time ago. He attacked the stuff with gusto, and while it wasn't exactly the most palatable fare in the galaxy, still it tasted fine.

Jaabic and Saafiska wagged their necks, turned indifferently away from the trays set before them. Being energy-eaters, they required no material food, and Qulpin's blue sun was quite enough for them. But Jessup, literally, ate like a pig, stuffing food in his mouth and continuing steady, meaningless chatter while he ate. Liquids slopped over his white linen suit, staining it purple and red, and because there were no previous stains, Phil concluded the suit was new.

Jessup's plates were empty before Phil had fairly begun his meal, and the heavy, perspiring man speared a couple of ripe fruits from Phil's plate, stuffed them into his mouth, smiled. He'd been in the Globular long enough, evidently, to acquire some of the traits which went with an almost psychotic possessiveness.

He said he wouldn't help them. Well, that's all there was to it. If Jessup didn't want to, he didn't want to. Just like that.

Only it wasn't just like that at all, because Georgia might hang in the balance, and Jessup, Phil had a hunch, could more than fend for himself here on Qulpin, despite what he had said. It wasn't much of a choice, really—and now as he made it, Phil wondered why he did not reach it sooner.

"Jaabic," he said, "Jaabic, will you do me a favor?"

"What would you like?"

"Ask Jennings Jessup here where Georgia is."

"Certainly, Phil. Jessup, where is Georgia?"

"I said I wouldn't tell you. I can't."

Phil pushed the tray, away, stood up. "There, Jessup. You see, I've asked you, my friend has asked you. Really, we'd like to know. Are you going to tell us?"

Jessup too stood up. "I—I think I'd better call Brx. That's what I'd better do—"

"Jaabic!" Phil's voice was harsh, but low.

Jaabic smiled, circled around behind Jessup's bulk, clamped an armored paw over his mouth. Saafiska bent down, crushed the metal trays between her hands until they looked corrugated.

Jessup's eyes were pleading. Sweat rolled down his face.

"Talk now?" Phil demanded.

The pinkening head shook stubbornly in Jaabic's grasp.

JAABIC began to apply pressure to Jessup's right forearm, still clamping the man's mouth shut with his other paw. "I hope he talks," Jaabic said. "Honest, Phil, I wouldn't like to carry this thing too far."

"Nor would I. Only we've got to know, don't we? And Jessup can tell us."

Saafiska turned away, grumbling something under her breath. Jessup looked like he wanted to scream, but only a gurgling sound came from his closed mouth.

"You'll talk, now?" Jaabic wanted to know. It was crude stuff, Phil knew, and it didn't make him feel any great shakes of a hero—but they had to find out.

Jessup's head bobbed up and down vigorously, and Jaabic said: "Very well, I shall let your mouth go, but please don't call that pyramid-thing. I think you know I didn't want to kill you."

Jessup's right arm hung limp as he staggered around the room for a moment, sobbing. "Why did you have

to come here to the Globular?" he wailed.

"Talk."

"She's here. Damn it, she's here in Lorag."

"Lorag? Where is Lorag?" Saafiska demanded.

"This city. This city is Lorag. That's where the woman is."

"It's a big city," Jaabic told him.

"Where the kids are kept, the little puff-balls. Good hiding place, don't you think? No one pays much attention to the kids. Just a couple of keepers who dish out the food and things like that. Open stockade, a few scattered lean-tos. But under it—ah, under it! Now will you go?"

"Those poor children, kept like that," said Saafiska.

Jaabic scratched his armored chest. "How do we know this Jessup is not lying? He could have contrived the whole thing—"

"It doesn't sound contrived." Phil shook his head. "No—I think we'll chance it."

Jaabic was still scratching his chest. It made loud scraping noises. "How will we know he doesn't tell that pyramid thing?"

Phil smiled grimly. "He won't. The last thing he wants Brx-it to know is that he told us. We're safe there, Jaabic."

He went out with Jaabic through the same door they had entered. Behind them, Jessup sat morosely in his room, holding his injured arm. Phil even smiled at Pyramid and the purple fur-ball as they passed through that ante-room and out into the street.

PHIL DIDN'T realize that Saafiska was not with them until they had reached the stockade which, as Jessup had told them, was just down the street. It stood on a broad flat area and the fence was a jagged crystaline substance which would, Phil knew, defy even the scurrying legs of the small fur-balls.

"Where's Saafiska?" Phil said. Vaguely, her absence worried him.

"Oh, she'll be along in a moment or two. Don't worry. She told me something about a slight delay. Relax, Phil. This is going to be over shortly, and meanwhile Saafiska—"

A voice hailed them from down the street. Scores of fur-balls, stick-men and other creatures were thrown in confused heaps as Saafiska swept by. "Hey, wait for me!"

Dropping assorted fruits and vegetables along the way, Saafiska reached them. Her arms were loaded with pulpy Qulpinian fruits and long bunches of stringy vegetables.

Phill jabbed a finger at her chest and three ripe red fruits fell to the ground, splattering. "What the hell's that stuff for?"

"I took it from Jessup's kitchen. He didn't mind, after I convinced him."

"Well, what's it for?" You could feed a small army with the armful Saafiska carried. Saafiska would say nothing more about it. Her teeth clicked excitedly. "So this is the stockade. This is where they keep those poor children."

"Can't scale that fence," Jaabic observed. "There should be a gate.... Ah!"

There was. But there also was a gate-keeper, another of the purple fur-balls. He looked queerly at them with his big deep eyes, particularly at Saafiska and her assortment of food, but he let them pass. Apparently you could go anywhere on Qulpin during the Games, because no one would stop you from looking for the booty wherever you wished.

The crystal walls of the stockade were smoky, but you could see through them clearly enough, and outside a crowd had gathered to watch them, mostly fur-balls. Scurrying in all directions were the smaller fur-balls within the stockade, the children. Hundreds of them, all whistling shrilly.

Saafiska grinned, and three rows of teeth or not, Phil knew it for a moth-

erly smile. "The poor things!" she coo'd. "The poor, poor things...."

She began to throw the food around, making whistling noises that were obvious attempts at baby talk in Qulpinian. The small fur-balls, some as big as your fist and some two and three times that size, fought over it. Presently Saafiska had emptied her arms, stood watching the children eat. Their manners, if possible, were worse than Jessup's, but it didn't look so bad on them.

"I don't know," Jaabic said. "I don't know—"

BRAZEN bells cut him short. The purple guard peeked within the gate, held a small metal tube in half a dozen of his legs. Something blasted a chunk off one of the lean-tos behind Saafiska.

"They're shooting at us!" Jaabic cried.

Phil shook his fist at Saafiska. "You! Why the hell you had to feed them.... Didn't you stop to think that would be the worst crime of all here in the Globular? It's the traditional substitute for birth-control, treat the kids rough. The whole backbone of their culture. Damn you.... We'll have to get Georgia and run—"

"No time!" Jaabic called over his shoulder, plunging toward the gate and the guard with his little tube. "They'll trap us in here in another minute, and we don't even know the way underground."

Phil planted his feet firmly. "Nuts! I'm not going this time, not without Georgia."

Jaabic was bobbing and spinning and ducking toward the gate, running erratically, presenting a difficult target. The guard's tube did nothing that you could see, but every few seconds the ground near Jaabic became scorched or some of the little fur-balls sizzled and died.

Something splintered behind Phil and he saw another of the lean-tos was going. A black pit appeared in the wreckage, revealing a steep ramp, going down. "The way underground!" Phil cried. "Here—"

Three or four of the purple fur-balls stood at the gate with the keeper, and Jaabic yelled: "That stuff scorches. I think it would melt right through my plates on a direct hit, but I don't want to find out."

"I'm going down!" Phil screamed.

"Don't. You'd never make it up again. They'll be swarming in here in another minute. Come on—"

Phil didn't move. Saafiska and her crazy tricks weren't going to stop him, not this time. He'd turn around and pop out of sight down that ramp....

Jessup reached the gate, a melted, fused, glowing mess, all of his designs gone, and some of his armor plate too. He began to fling the fur-balls around. "Saafiska," he called, "take that lunatic and get out of there."

Phil backed toward the pit. "Keep away. Scram, Saafiska. Come on, beat it."

She advanced, her left shoulder beginning to sizzle. "Jaabic's right. That's good and hot. It can slow us, even kill us if it hits right. Good thing we don't feel pain, not really, not like you flesh-things do."

"Keep away!"

Abruptly, Saafiska scooped him up in her plated arms, turned and plunged toward the gate. Momentarily the way was clear, but Phil, kicking furiously, heard Jaabic fighting with the fur-balls, heard their whistling and more bells. "Monster! Dragon! Creature! Put me down so I can get Georgia—"

Saafiska plunged on through the gate with him, in Jaabic's wake, cursing every time a blast from the tubes scorched her back. "Jaabic will be very angry when he sees what's happening to our designs," she predicted.

NIGHT. The three sat in the damp of the marsh that bordered on the city of Lorag. Phil shivered with the cold. "You stinker," he said.

"I didn't mean any harm, Phil. How would I know what their reac-

tion would be? And you've got to admit the children were maltreated."

"That's nothing," Phil said. "I forgive you for that, Saafiska. You meant well. But I can't forgive you carrying me out of there like an infant. My wife—"

"No one said anything about abandoning her, Phil. Now that it's dark, we can return. But I will insist that Saafiska remains right here."

"In the marsh? Alone?" Saafiska stood up, indignantly, paws on pelvic region.

"In the marsh and alone." Her husband nodded.

"Sure," said Phil, brightening. "We can return. There's no reason why they'll expect us back at the stockade, because they don't know Georgia's there. They may want to kill us on sight, but if they don't know we're coming—"

And so it was arranged. Saafiska complained, was adamant, said she felt rejected, wanted to cry except she had no tear ducts. But in the end she remained in the marsh while Jaabic and Phil crept back toward the lights of Lorag.

FUR-BALLS and stick-men were abroad in number when they reached the city, but the avenues were dimly-lit and shadowy. Jaabic and Phil did not attract attention, and at their estimate it was midnight when they reached the stockade.

Phil heard whistling, and Jaabic cautioned him back away from the gate. "One of them we can handle, but if there's more than one an alarm might be given."

They waited. It had been cloudy all evening, and now some rain began to fall in big splashing drops. Nearby, in the gate-house, the whistling continued. The drizzle became a torrent, sluicing off Jaabic's armor, but soaking Phil's jumper and underwear thoroughly. Still the whistling. Perhaps now the fur-balls spoke of the Games—without realizing they harbored the booty almost directly beneath them. Phil supposed it was common knowledge that the booty consisted of a female mammalian biped. He wondered what a fur-ball or stick-man or nameless horror would do with one—but that was no way to think of his wife.

Suddenly, something dark and round scurried through the gate. The guard was alone.

Together, they crept forward—and Phil whistled, softly. Out of the gate-house came a purple fur-ball. Jaabic's arm swept down through the rain and Phil heard a soft sucking sound like your fist might make if it slammed into a mess of gelatin.

The baby fur-balls were all around them, whistling, but not nearly as many as Phil had expected—until he remembered the rain. Most of them must have been back under the slight shelter the lean-tos could offer.

Ahead, the blasted lean-to loomed out of the darkness. When they reached the ramp, Phil was running. He found a door, clawed at it, calling Georgia's name, thought he heard an answering cry from within. The lock—confound that lock!—was too high for the fur-balls' short reach. Then stick-men or pyramid himself must have been the custodians. Down low there was a slot; evidently they gave Georgia her food through that.

"You're trembling too much," hissed Jaabic. "Here, let me open it."

The door swung in—on pitch darkness. A voice: "Phil? Phil?"

He thought he heard a noise, a faraway wailing, paid it no heed. Whatever it was, it could wait. "Georgia, darling!" Her warmth was in his arms.

Said Jaabic, "We win the Games. But hurry. That noise—"

A fine time to talk about a little noise. A fine time....

But Jaabic was pulling them apart.

THE NOISE grew louder. By the time they reached the top of the ramp it was a continuous piercing

wall. "Apparently," Jaabic told them, "the door activiates those sirens all over Qulpin. So, we've let the fat out of the bag."

"You mean cat," Georgia said, laughing.

"It's not funny, Georgia. Everyone on Qulpin knows that the Games are over, and I daresay Pyramid and his little frlends will be coming here to see who won the booty."

They got through the gate, but a thousand floodlights, it seemed, glared down on them on the broad avenue. Before they ran very far, Pyramid, Jennings Jessup and a green fur-ball who must have been Boorkl-san intercepted them.

"Congratulations," Pyramid said acidly. It was apparent he did not llke the situation at all. "In the future," he told them, "no extra-Globular creatures will be permitted to enter the Asha-akon Games. The booty should be kept here on Qulpin, certainly within the Globular."

"Well, next time," Jennings Jessup suggested. "We'll be starting the new Games almost at once, if you'd like. No reason to wait, and we can see to it that no aliens—" Jessup's right forearm was swathed in bandages.

Boorkl-san was whistling something. Out of Pyramid's mouth came what Phil took to be a sigh. "Yes, I suppose so. Hurths, the traditional party is still yours if you'd like it...."

Jaabic agreed at once. "Fine. I'd certainly like a chance to study your culture—" But then he got suspicious. "What about all that shooting this afternoon?"

"Oh," again Pyramid seemed regretful, "that's over and done with. You've won the Games, haven't you?"

Said Georgia, "I don't think I'd like to go to any party—"

"Sprawl-sport!" Jaabic cried. "Sprawl-sport!"

Something was gnawing at Phil's consciousness, had been since they'd rescued Georgia. "The door!" he cried.

"Door? What door?" Jaabic seemed puzzled.

"Boorkl-san's door, our door. The airlock. They're probably destroying it now. Damn this possessive culture!"

They didn't even say goodbye to Pyramid, Boorkl-san and Jennings Jessup. All their efforts might have been for nothing if Boorkl-san's furry friends got to their ship and retaliated on their airlock.

Through the avenues of the city they ran, and out upon the road that took them through the marshland, now a quagmire. Phil couldn't catch his breath at all when they reached the ship. There were no fur-balls.

They stumbled in through the lock. Phil clutched the controls lovingly, began to warm the atomics.

Jaabic said, "Evidently the mechanism that activated the sirens also released the force-field around the ships. Good thing. Good.... Saafiska!" he thundered. "My wife!"

He bolted out through the lock and soon was lost in the marsh.

It was growing light, and the rain had stopped. How long? Jaabic had been gone all of two hours, probably couldn't find Safiska. Well, a few moments more....

An aircraft came wooshing down out of the sky, landed a few hundred yards off. Half a dozen green furballs approached them ominously, toting slim metal tubes.

Saafiska's voice came faintly, far away: "We're coming!" Traveling under a full head of steam, the two Shiykans really could move. Like twin bowling balls they scattered Boorkl-san and his startled fellows, plunged within the ship.

Acceleration gripped Phil and hurled him back in his chair. He didn't mind it at all.

Saafiska sniffed, "I see we won the Games." But her three rows of black teeth spread in a broad grin across her muddy silver face. She stuck out a big paw and pumped Georgia's hand vigorously.



WHO'S ZOO?

by L. MAJOR REYNOLDS

What the galaxy needed now was a couple of lively new specimens for its oxygen zoo

THERE WAS a stir among the occupants of the great, dully gleaming ship as the surface of the planet beneath it became clearer. The Commander switched on a machine and took a check of atmosphere.

"An oxygen bearing world!" he exclaimed. "Dan Cor, look in the record and see how many years it has been since we discovered one of these."

The creature who obeyed his request had a completely globular body supported on half a hundred tiny legs which twinkled back and forth with amazing speed. The eyes were at the ends of elongated tendrils which sprouted at every angle, and a mobile sensitive mouth cut a slit just under the lowest of them. From the middle of the body, several arms sprang seemingly at random. As the being reached toward a set of dials and levers, several more of the pseudopods shot out from the flesh surface, until there were a dozen or more of them lightly flicking over the controls.

"According to the last report, Bar Ein, it was over ten thousand years ago."

"By the gods!" Nim Ur, the navigator, spoke up. "I was on that expedition. We found a very peculiar animal and took a pair of them to the oxygen zoo. Evidentally this is the first world of that sort discovered since then!"

"May I ask a question, honored sir?" This from one of the crew.

"Of course, Bien For, what is it?"

"What, sir, is an oxygen zoo?"

The request brought out several more eyes from the top of Nim Ur's globe. He stared silently at the speaker for a moment, then most of the eyes disappeared.

"Of course," he exclaimed. "You hadn't broken your shell when we made the last trip! I'd forgotten what a youngster you are.

"In the matter of the zoo, we have a number of them. When we find a planet with a certain atmosphere, we take specimens of life from it and transfer them to a zoo with that sort of air. Our zoos are scattered around the galaxy. The oxygen one was started long before I was hatched. I've been there several times, but the last

trip was so uninteresting I never cared to return. However, if this world below us has any new specimens, you'll be able to satisfy your curiosity. We'll take them to our oxygen zoo and release them."

A call from Dan Cor brought them all to the viewpoint. Beneath the ship the planet's surface had become clear, and all marvelled at the thought of any creature being able to live on a world covered with such dense vegetation. Nowhere was there a sign of the shiny bare rock that made easy walking on their home world, and this clear air was a poor substitute for the menthane clouds they were accustomed to.

"Do you mean, sir," Bein For marvelled, "that living creatures actually exist on a planet like this?"

"On this and many others," Bar Ein answered for the navigator. "But of all the ones we have discovered, this is the only atmosphere we are unable to breathe even for a second. It brings swift death to us."

"What is death, honored sir?"

THERE WAS a concerted gasp of horror from the entire personnel at the question. Bar Ein turned a particularly unlovely shade of green, and motioned the rash one to silence. Overcoming his emotion with an effort, he turned back to the viewpoint.

Dan Cor, who had been using every eye he possessed, finally broke the silence.

"If you will watch the trees down there, I think you will see a specimen of life on this world. I caught a glimpse of something, but whatever it was, disappeared in the shadows."

"That's easily remedied," Bar Ein said. He flicked out a pseudopod and touched a lever. The next instant the ground below was bathed in a brilliant blue light. There was no shadow, the light seemingly came from all directions at once.

Dan Cor gave a grunt of satisfaction. "I'll wager," he said with a grin," we'll find that creature down there is an entirely new species. I've looked over the records, and never has there been anything remotely resembling *that!*"

"I think I agree with you, Dan Cor," Bar Ein shuddered as he watched the creature below.

The life under discussion was gigantic. The spider-like body of the thing, with its elongated hour glass shape, was covered with bright green hair. From the center of what seemed to be the head, three shining eyes blazed upward into the light. Twenty feet in the air it towered, on sixteen bowed legs, and from the base of the body, eight long, slim, orange-colored tentacles whipped the air in all directions. The thing was plainly in an overpowering rage.

"I've never seen anything as bad as that in my dreams," Dan Cor said slowly. "Do you think we can handle a pair of them?"

"As long as they have enough of a brain to respond to the sleep ray," Nim Ur said, "there should be no trouble. Shall I order the ray turned on, Bar Ein, and the grapples lowered?"

"Might as well. We'll get this job over and go on with our explorations. I hope to send in a good report of my activities to the Emperor on my return."

The craft descended to within thirty feet of the surface before the spider creature went into action. The body suddenly lowered on legs that bent almost into a circle, then straightened with a snap. The thing left the ground in a tremendous leap which carried it above the ship. Several bladder-like appendages suddenly appeared, and it floated down to envelop the vessel with all sixteen legs. The tentacles, dripping a brownish liquid, beat at the ports insanely, and their tips searched frantically as if for some sort of an opening where it could get leverage.

The entire crew were watching in open mouthed amazement, when Bar Ein screamed:

"Into your suits! The venom is

dissolving the port glass!"

A FLASHING run into outer space exploded the clinging horror into shreds, and repairs were begun. This time, a triple layer of glass was set in, with vacuum between each layer. It had been a close thing, and the ship was filled with oxygen from the pierced ports. The pumps, however, quickly emptied the craft of the clear air, and replaced it with the muggy methane.

"Do you still think," Dan Cor said as he climbed out of his suit, "that we should take a pair of those specimens to our zoo?"

"Certainly!" Bar Ein snapped.

There was no difficulty locating other spiders creatures when the ship returned again to the surface. The one who had been destroyed must have sent out some sort of call, for the ground was a swaying mass of hate-filled red eyes, and reaching tentacles that slobbered.

"I think they have brains enough for the sleep ray," Nim Ur said slowly. "That looks like a declaration of war."

"Turn it on then," Dan Cor shuddered. "I've seen enough!"

From openings in bow, stern and sides of the ship came a soft red ray that spread over the ground below, dropping the monsters in a tangled mass. Then, from the bottom of the craft, long flexible hooked cables drooped down, and picked up several of the creatures. The cables were withdrawn carrying their victims with them, and the lower hatches closed with a thud.

"That'll take care of the things," Nim Ur said with a shudder. "Are you going to keep them asleep?"

"I think it would be wise," Bar Ein answered. "I'll leave just enough of the ray active so there will be no possibility of them awakening."

"By the gods, we'd *better* keep them asleep!" Dan Cor gasped. "Look at the rest of them!"

The moment the ray had been removed from the remainder of the creatures, every one of them had come to life with a vengeance. They were making desperate efforts to gain a foothold on the craft above them, and as those in the ship watched, several of the creatures by dint of over expanded air bladders, were leaping into the air just missing the stern plates.

Bar Ein sent the ship swiftly up out of danger. "Our lives," he remarked in a voice he tried to keep steady, wouldn't have been worth anything if even one of those things had managed to get hold of us." He was silent for a moment, then:

"Dan Cor, will you lay the course for our destination?"

"I've already done so," was the answer. "It's frame sixty-three right ascension 104 degrees, eleven and three quarters light years, Pim Dum Planet three."

"Good! Give the pilot his orders!"

For the first half of the trip, an unusual silence reigned in the ship. It had been too close a thing to members of a civilization trained to deny the fact of death. Dan Cor, the irrepressible finally broke the stillness.

"Hadn't we better take a look at our specimens, and see what we have?"

The lights were turned on in the specimen cage, and its contents examined.

"Only three of them!" Bar Ein exclaimed in disgust. "I thought the hooks had caught at least six!"

IT TOOK careful study, and they were nearly at their destination before a biological fact became certainty: the captives were all males!

"Well," Dan Cor demanded, "what do we do now?"

"Load them in the landing crate, release them, and go back for the females," Bar Ein answered.

"Do you mean we've got to go through this *again?*"

"That isn't the right spirit, Dan Cor," Bar Ein chided. "Remember, this is all in the name of science."

"Science it may be," Dan Cor retorted, "but the more I think of it, the less I like it. Why, I ask you, do we set ourselves up as judges of what life should be shut up in our zoos?"

The silence was so thick it curdled, and for sometime no one spoke except to give a necessary order. The remark had been close to treason.

But that silence was shattered when they arrived at the zoo. Bar Ein, at the vision plate, called sharply:

"Come here at once!" There was an urgency in his tone that made all of them hurry to their own plates.

Below them was spread a world that as far as the eye could see,was a mass of cities seemingly without end. Great towering huildings lined the hroad avenues, and the air was filled with an assortment of flying craft whose numher was too numerous even to guess. The inhahitants, garbed in a variety of bright colors, could he seen everywhere.

The visitors were dumbfounded. Finally, some courageous one found voice enough to ask weakly:

"Th-th-this is our zoo?"

Dan Cor gazed at the husy world for a long time, and gave a long sigh.

"Well," he said with a grin, "I imagine we'll have to find ourselves a new zoo. We certainly can't let those three hloodthirsty demons loose on *that* civilization!"

"That's where you're mistaken!" Bar Ein snapped. "As leader of this expedition, I say we will leave the specimens here, return and get the females, and land them also. Dan Cor, I'm afraid you're losing your mind!"

"But the inhabitants of that world have a culture almost equal to our own!"

"Silence!" Bar Ein commanded. He ordered the pilot to lower the ship, and when the desired distance had been reached, touched a lever that opened the trap in the base of the craft.

There was a small flash of the red ray, then a case containing the captives floated down below a great parachute. Bar Ein, watching through glasses, said suddenly:

"It's a good thing we left the ray on them during the trip. They have awakened already. We really should have notified the Council and the Emperor about this. It should he rare sport!"

The case landed in the center of a wide street which was filled with curious people, watching hoth it and the strange craft that hung ahove them. But as the box landed and opened, the populace took one horrified look and tried to run. They were too late, for the enraged spider creatures had propelled themselves from the case, and hanging on inflated hladders, were spraying their deadly venom far and wide.

BAR EIN hung at his viewport in utter ecstacy, drinking in the scene of carnage below. His globular hody was pulsating with various shades of green as he stared avidly, not to miss anything that was going on.

"Dan Cor," he commanded, "come here and watch! I've never dreamed of such a delightful spectacle! Those late captives of ours are killing hundreds of the other species!"

Unwillingly, Dan Cor went forward. One look was enough, and he turned from the port in disgust.

"What you are able to enjoy in that spectacle, Bar Ein," he said coldly, "I can't understand. Those are highly civilized heings down there, and we are treating them like animals!"

"And why not?" Bar Ein seemed surprised at the vehemence in the other's voice. "They *are* animals! They're the descendants of the various species we have put there for our pleasure! Although," and there was a whisper of amusement in his voice, "I never expected them to give us *this* much pleasure!"

There was a sudden cry from Bien For who had been watching from his own port. Bar Ein whirled around to see the cause, and blazed with rage.

"But they can't do do that!" he yelled. "Stop it, you fools! Stop it at once!"

Dan Cor hurried to a port and grinned at the scene below. He was just in time to see the last of the monsters blown to shreds from a weapon in the hands of several blue clad inhabitants.

The next instant he had yanked the speed control open to the limit, and in less than a breath, the ship was out in the emptiness of space.

Bar Ein, who was sprawled in a corner, sprouted a series of legs, and walked himself upright.

"And may I ask," he said coldly, "the meaning of *that* maneuver?"

"Atomic energy. I was afraid they might have it."

"You're insane!" Bar Ein exploded. "Those cattle down there have no conception of atomics! If *we* haven't been able to discover it—"

"Well you'd better consult the telltale and make sure."

Every eye Bar Ein possessed shot out to its limit before he saw the pointer on the telltale was not aimed at the purple. There must have been a sneaking fear that Dan Cor could have been right, for it took him several minutes to get the situation under control. It was only when he finally spoke that the crew realized what the shock and fear had done to him. There was pure venom in his order:

"Dan Cor, you will notify the home planet to send every barge we possess to the planet of the spider creatures. We'll bring every one of them to this planet and turn them loose! If those animals down there think they can frustrate my desires, I'll show them they're sadly mistaken!"

"But, Bar Ein—" Dan Cor tried to object.

"Silence! *I* am the leader of this expedition, and my word is law! I started out to add certain specimens to this zoo, and by the nine gods I'll add them!"

IT WAS A long flight back to the planet they had found, and most of the trip was spent in grim silence. It was only when they arrived that Bar Ein permitted himself a grunt of satisfaction.

There were fully fifty of the great barges awaiting them, and down on the surface of the world were piles of the spider creatures lying quietly under the sleep rays.

"Now that," Bar Ein said with satisfaction, "is exactly what I had in mind." He picked up the interphone and gave orders.

"Load every one of those creatures, and be sure the ray doesn't slip from them for a single instant! After that, you will follow me to the following section." He gave the co-ordinates, then watched the scene below.

As the top layers of the piles were removed, and the ray followed the captives aloft, those remaining on the ground came to fighting, slavering life again.

Some of the leaps which the monsters made were almost incredible, but with all their efforts they fell short of the ships hovering safely out of range.

There was a sudden commotion at the airlock, and Bar Ein hurried forward to greet the newcomers. It was the ruler of the home world, come to see the entertainment about to be provided.

"Sen Dae!" Bar Ein was all but crawling as he sprouted too many legs in an attempt to bow. "This is an honor I didn't expect."

The visitor allowed a single extra eye to pop out, and stared boredly about the cabin. From his expression, he didn't expect much from this visit, and he didn't bother to conceal his feelings.

"Bar Ein, you have called us on a matter which should be pure routine by this time. Why, may I ask, is there anything of special importance in those," he gestured downward at the raging creatures below, and sought for a word, "those—*things* down there!"

Bar Ein almost tripped over his

words explaining the situation. As he talked, the ruler's face lost some of its boredom, and by the time he had finished, Sen Dae's enthusiasm almost matched the other's.

"But where did the things come from who have civilized our zoo?" he demanded.

"They are descendants of the very captives we placed there long ago!"

"Impossible! Those vermin would *never* be able to invent anything as complex as a wheel!" the ruler exploded. "Some other race has landed and taken over!"

"It is probably as you say, honored sir," Bar Ein was on the verge of a three cornered huff, but he didn't dare show it. "But if that is the case, they are creatures of exactly the same kind we put there."

"That," San Dae said decisively, "I will have to see for myself. Is there any way you can hasten the loading?"

Thing were in a mess. Several of the barges had been pierced and lay in a tangled mass on the ground below, where the spiders were busily rending them into their component atoms. The only trace of the personnel was a few shreds of skin lying around. Bar Ein was so horrified he didn't notice the work was being carried on from a much higher level.

"How did those barges get wrecked?" he screamed.

"Those things down there are a little smarter than we gave them credit for being," Dan Cor answered. "They climbed to the tops of the trees and jumped from there. About six of them made it to the lowest barge, and from that one to three of the others was a short jump. We couldn't get the barges away in time, and without any motive power, the crews were helpless. We've moved up to five hundred feet, and we're going to *stay* here!"

FOR ONCE, Bar Ein couldn't find words to fit, and the pair stood silent, gazing down at the scene below.

The work took hours, but finally the last stunned spider was snugged away under a strong sleep ray, and the long journey to the zoo was started.

Sen Dae, much to Bar Ein's disgust, decided to make the trip in the exploration ship. This action effectively put a gag on the temperamental leader, and he was forced to keep his rage under double wraps. And to make matters worse, he couldn't mistake the slight grin of derision that adorned every mouth.

It was an uneventful trip and Bar Ein was beginning to breathe a little easier when their destination came in sight. He didn't even allow the fleet to pause. It swept down toward the surface as if contemptous of any danger.

"Don't you think, Bar Ein," Dan Cor tried a suggestion, "we should reconnoiter a bit before we go too close?"

Bar Ein, seeing the emperor was at a safe distance, snapped: "I'll take care of the landing, and I'll thank you to remember I'm the leader of this expedition! Get back to your duties!"

The array of ships were within a mile of the surface before Bar Ein began to have a few doubts. The locale below was the same as the previous visit, but now there was a difference. He gave a sharp command into the interphone.

"Stop where you are!" He looked down, increased the magnification on his lens, and tried to see what was changed.

The buildings still towered along the streets, but nowhere could he see a sign of the teeming multitudes that had populated the city on their last visit.

What he did see, though, sent an uneasy thrill down what passed for Bar Ein's spine. They were grey, furnished with a sort of broad open nose, and their sleek roundness reflected sunlight in an ominous glare. Even as he watched, Bar Ein saw one of the things spin swiftly and point its orifice toward him. There was no action, just a sense of watchful waiting which

transferred itself to the watcher.

"What are you waiting for?" Sen Dae broke the silence abruptly. "We came here to teach these vermin a lesson, so let's get on with it!"

Bar Ein collected his scattered emotions with an effort, and gave orders for the first of the barges to lower away. The crew, each clad in spacesuits, took it within half mile of the surface, and prepared to abandon ship. Dan Cor unwillingly reached for the controls which would guide the craft until it reached the ground, where once emptied, it would be raised again.

It is doubtful if the tip of his pseudopod ever touched the lever. There was a sudden loud noise, audible even to those in the ship, and the barge flew into bits, scattering its contents far and wide, and making mincemeat of its occupants.

THE NEXT instant shells were bursting all around the fleet. Suddenly, one of them exploded with a crash which flattened Sen Dae and all the others. There was a dead silence for a breath, and in that silence, Dan Cor, flattened on the side of the cabin, yelled:

"The telltale! Look at it!"

The pointer was perched squarely in the center of the purple. Bar Ein struggled to his feet and made a lunge for the controls. He sent the ship upward at a dizzy speed, and this time it didn't halt when it reached outer space.

The craft was a lonely survivor that made the long trip back to the home planet, and during that trip, Bar Ein squirmed under the stern and unrelenting glare of San Dae.

It was a grim and serious conclave who drafted a short, terse announcement a little later, which was given as wide a circulation as possible:

PROCLAMATION!

DUE TO THE NEED OF REDUCING THE BUDGET, AND THE FACT THAT ITS SOLAR SYSTEM IS SO FAR REMOVED, IT HAS BEEN DECIDED TO ABANDON THE OXYGEN ZOO. WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES PERMIT, ANOTHER WILL BE STARTED, BUT FROM NOW ON, ALL SPACE WITHIN ONE LIGHT YEAR OF THAT SYSTEM IS HEREBY DECLARED OUT OF BOUNDS. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW!

By order
SEN DAE, EMPEROR
DAN COR, EXPEDITIONARY LEADER.

THE END

(Answers to Marvel Science -Fiction Quiz on page 57)

I.
1. b.
2. c.
3. c.
4. b.
5. a.

II.
6. Type O.
7. The Planet Uranus which can be seen as a star of the fifth magnitude.
8. The sun's rays would be tremendously potent with no cushion of air shielding the ship.
9. Because the mixture can dissolve the "noble metal," gold and platinum.
10. Nitrogen—which makes up more than 70% of the atmosphere.

III.
11. True.
12. False—this was recently done with an X-ray microscope. Atoms of iron and sulphur were photographed.
13. False. Since its energy comes from the atomic nucleus, it would more properly be called the nuclear bomb.
14. True. Certain dinosaurs of the Brontosaurus family were the largest land animals, but today's sperm whale is a lot larger.

IV.
15. h.
16. g.
17. a.
18. e.
19. d.
20. b.

TIME WAS

by F. G. RAYER

MARVEL PROUDLY PRESENTS: AN EXCITING, IMPORTANT SHORT NOVEL BY GREAT BRITAIN'S NEW SCIENCE-FICTION SENSATION!



CHAPTER I

DREAMER

THE HIGH buildings and wide, busy streets baked under the evening sun. Beyond the city boundary, a shining spear upthrust at the sky, gleamed a vessel that overtopped even the green and cream buildings. Nick Riordan withdrew from the window and put on his tie. There had never been a vessel like the *Project 13,* he thought—could never be another like her, for she was the first of her kind. Little ships had made their tiny journeys to the other planets in the system, but *Project 13* used molecular combustion, and should reach other galaxies. She was the trailmaker. The others—for there would be others, he was sure—would only *follow.*

"Still dreaming, Nick?"

He turned from the mirror and put on his jacket. His wife smiled wist-



Man was indeed a wonderful thing, supreme, always conquering. Just as the giant saurians had been . . .

fully, her eyes turned down. Her chin was level with his shoulder and he lifted it.

"Who doesn't, when he's making history, Niora? *Project 13* can take men out of this system. Doesn't that thrill you?"

Niora lifted thin, pencilled brows. "Perhaps. Things like that mean less in a woman's life. The inventor of gunpowder created history, too."

Nick examined her, a deep wrinkle of concentration on his forehead. Her judgment was usually sound; her face had a purposeful look and could be stubborn, despite her beauty, but was abruptly illuminated by a smile.

"You'll be late to see Alfred

Somers, Nick," she reminded him. "It'll take you an hour to reach his place."

"It will," he agreed. "Changed your mind?"

"No, Nick. I won't come. When men talk shop about things women don't understand we're better out of it."

NICK RODE the lift three floors down to street level and got his saloon from the basement garage. Alf Somers was one of the three men he counted as friends. Soon the streets were far behind and he sped East along the radial road, and through the green helt surrounding the city. At an intersection he turned off, and his lean, high-boned face slipped momentarily into a wry grin. This was not the shortest way—hut it took him by the *Project 13* site, and his gaze sought ahead.

Sun shone on the upper part of the long vessel; the lower half was in shadow. She stood squarely upon her stern fins, from which radiated the railway lines along which equipment was hrought. Four trucks and a locomotive rolled slowly from sight behind the ship's hase, and Nick slowed involuntarily. The vessel's sheer mightiness was heautiful, he thought. There was arrogance in the way she pointed like a threatening spear at the evening sky. She showed men sought new worlds among the stars.

The sun was going from the hills beyond the city, and Nick turned into a second-class road, wondering of Alf Somers, his expression hleak. They had grown from hoys together. Alf would never play the traitor, Nick thought. That was not his way. But no other explanation fitted, yet.

The saloon wound down behind the hills and Nick looked across the valley for the little white and red house where Alf lived. Alf had been wholly a friend, Nick thought as he drove rapidly. Even when hoth had wanted to marry Niora there had been no misunderstanding between them. He tried to decide how to introduce what trouhled him. "Alf," he could say, "only you and I have ever seen or used the completed astrocompass of the *Project 13* ship. And *I* haven't talked—" It would not he easy to say.

He parked at the end of the gravel drive hefore the square white and red house and rang the bell. "We're honest men, Alf," he would say. "Let's talk this over quietly. There's an explanation, and I want to helieve it—"

There was no reply; he rang again, puzzled. He had phoned through ahout ten minutes hefore leaving—that would he ahout an hour and a quarter hefore, he calculated. Alf had answered, his voice not sounding wholly natural, and Nick tried to recall their exact words. "I'd like to call—to talk something over, Alf." Alf had said: "Not tonight, I'm working," then hung up. That itself had heen odd and not like Alf, Nick reflected as he walked round the house. He had wanted to say some things were too important to wait.

The brick building Alf called his workshop in obvious understatement was at the end of the garden away from the road. No lights shone from its frosted windows. Nick tried the door, found it locked, and after hesitating turned the small steel dial set ahove the knob. "I'm half deaf when working," Alf had once said, and told him the combination. "Come in any time you like. I fixed this lock after leaving my keys in town one day. . . ."

The workshop, three-roomed, high and airy, was empty. Machine tools stood silent, and in the second room electronic instruments filled the shelves and littered a long bench. Nick crossed it, feet soundless on the insulated floor, and pushed open the door into what Alf called the reference room.

Chairs stood round the central table, littered with books from the shelves lining the walls. A strange

sense of something wrong crept over Nick as a sixth sense whispered of danger of an odd, unknown kind. Walking stiffly, eyes alert, he moved to the table. Behind it lay a man in a blue overall with red hair brushed back, and quite still. Nick went round quickly and knelt by the body. Alf Somers did not move. His light blue eyes gazed up unseeingly and an inexplicable expression seemed locked forever on his face. His heart did not beat.

Nick rose and went to the phone, but he halted without touching it. Better not, he decided. There *might* be prints.

He went quickly back through the workshops and locked the door, wondering how this tied up with leakage from the project site. He had started the car and was backing to turn when the house door opened and a man in a blue overall came down the step to him. Nick found himself gazing up into light blue eyes in a mobile face topped by red hair, and his brain oscillated like a plucked spring: Alf Somers was back there in the reference room, motionless and cold. Yet, against all the dictates of sanity, Alf Somers was now looking in on him through the saloon window, frowning.

"Thought I told you not to come, Nick. I was busy," he said.

Nick met the blue eyes and felt the unease that had first caught his nerves in the reference room return intensely. Every wrinkle, every shade of hair and eye were Alf's. The voice was his; so was the hand on the open window. And yet Nick *knew* he had made no mistake. Alf Somers lay behind the table....

The eyes seemed to change hue and Nick knew his hesitation was noted. The hand—Alf's, yet not Alf's—reached for the saloon door handle.

Nick let in the clutch jerkily.... Only when he had negotiated the curving drive and his tires thrummed the main road did his panic subside and his color begin to return. His hastened breathing subsided; he lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, slowing the saloon to a safe speed. When he had reached the intersection to the green belt his full self-control had returned. He shuddered once, recalling the eyes that had looked into his. That second man who had come from the house was *not* Alf. Beyond that paradox Nick could not go.

JUDGE HENSON leaned back heavily in his wide chair and puffed cigar smoke at the ceiling. Through it his gaze returned keenly to Nick.

"So you reported the death from a call-box, then came right here?"

Nick nodded. Judge Henson was the second of the three men he counted as truly friend—and Niora's father. Sixty, shrewd, he could be relied upon.

"Yes. You're on the way back—and I wanted to talk. There were things I couldn't leave unsaid—"

"So I've gathered," Judge Henson commented drily from behind the haze. "You're sure Alfred Somers was dead?"

"Absolutely." Nick knew the judge's tone only concealed his intense, critical interest. "Men don't look like *that* when they're alive."

Judge Henson nodded quietly to himself so that the swivel chair behind the desk creaked. The desk lamp left his face in shadow. "What did the police think?" he asked abruptly.

"They're sending an ambulance and surgeon immediately, and asked me to go back."

"Yet you did not. That could look suspicious."

The odd timbre of the words arrested Nick. A shock radiated down his spine and his breathing momentarily halted. The voice suddenly seemed only an imitation of Judge Henson's—an indefinable something had been lost. It had been like that when the second Alf Somers had spoken through the open saloon window, and the tiny, inexplicable odd-

ness had made him engage the clutch with a jerk. Now his hands grew tight on the chair arms and his muscles tensed. He wished the judge was not in shadow, and the room was not so hazed with cigar smoke drifting in the brilliant disc of light cast on the desk.

"Suspicious?" Nick murmured, and congratulated himself that his voice betrayed nothing.

"The person who finds the body must always be suspect." The other drew on his cigar and exhaled smoke-rings towards the ceiling. Nick watched, fascinated. He had often seen Judge Henson do exactly that; yet this was different. Confused, he thought the other seemed no longer to be the man he had known, and was somehow dangerous, even as he smiled in the dimness, his round cheeks rising and his eyes on Nick. "I went to see Alfred and apparently left only an hour or so before you called. He was alive and well."

The statement held no accusation but Nick felt his nerves tighten again and he got up. His host swivelled round in his chair and came round the desk heavily, still in semi-shadow.

"You were—at Alf's?" Nick asked, his throat contracted.

"Certainly. He wanted me to check some legal papers."

That could be, Nick thought. Yet why did some intuitive sense scream that here was danger he did not understand; that the other, standing with one hand on the desk and watching him, was not Niora's father, and was not deceived....

"I see." Nick made his voice casual. He felt that an acute intelligence was deciding what should be done, and preparing to act. "I mentioned to the police I'd be coming here. So perhaps I'd better hurry." He wondered if the lie would pass.

The thickly lidded eyes did not waver; the sensation of sharp personal danger grew, but to the face came a smile which could have been Henson's, and reserved for an admired son-in-law.

"Very well, Nick." He indicated the door ponderously. "I'll let you out."

NICK DROVE with one hand, mopping his face. The perspiration was cold and he knew that his forehead and cheeks were white. Two friends had become—strangers. But so subtle was the change an acquaintance would never know. Alf Somers was a solitary, quiet man, and lived alone. Judge Henson had retired two years before; his wife was dead; Niora was his only daughter, and he kept company rarely. The choice had been good, Nick thought. The two had few close friends to notice... He frowned to himself. What did he mean—*the choice had been good?*

Orange globes ahead marked the green belt. Two searchlights illuminated the *Project 13* vessel, topped by red lights as an aircraft warning. On impulse Nick turned in through the main gate, showed his pass, and stopped outside the long offices. His *third* friend would be here...

He went into the outer office. A girl was drinking coffee and yawning behind the reception desk.

"Sam Cordy here?" he asked.

She blinked herself awake and smiled. "Yes, Mr. Riordan. In the outside bay."

"Thanks."

He let himself out and went across to buildings opposite. Trucks rolled past; men came and went, and in the machine shops tools whined. Nick felt his nerves tightening again as he approached the bay where Sam would be. Alf Somers had been the first; old Judge Henson his second friend.. With a shock he realised Sam, too, did not love society. He was unmarried, and almost lived on the site, immersed wholeheartedly in the project.

A man was coming towards him among the piles of stores and crated and labelled equipment, and Nick

halted. This was Sam. The eyes twinkling, and with tiny wrinkles; the slightly humorous uptilt to the corners of the mouth; the good-humoured face, a trifle round and boyish for a man of forty—all *were* Sam, and Nick felt as if a ponderous load had been removed from his shoulders.

"'Low, Nick." Sam slapped his back. "Come to see nobody's stolen our little rocket?"

Nick smiled faintly; Sam's jokes were always deplorably weak. They went out into the night air, away from the voices and activity in the bay, and Nick looked up. Almost overhead Ursa Major shone brightly; North, just visible, was the Cassiopeia group, and West, rising above the outline of *Project* 13, the Lyra and Hercules constellations.

"Have you ever felt how *big* the cosmos is, Nick?" Sam murmured. "That's where *we're* going. To the stars. Man is a wonderful thing, supreme, always conquering—"

"Time was when the giant saurians thought that way—if they thought." Nick wondered how to begin. "When a life-form expands out of its own environment, it must expect to come into conflict with creatures perhaps its superiors."

Sam Cordy seemed to be pondering. A light from the building threw their shadows long across the concrete. "Meaning what?" he asked at last.

"That the cosmos is big, as you say. That *Project 13* constitutes a threat to everything out there." Nick indicated the heavens. "It will give man the power to impose himself on other worlds. That other worlds may not care to be imposed upon, is a point we seldom consider. Mars and Venus are like Earth—pebbles in the same puddle. Out there may be planets and worlds quite different. *Project 13* is a stepping-stone to those worlds. Time was when mankind was the greatest thing men knew; when he could build his stepping stones how and when he wished. But I've often wondered whether that will always be so. Why should *man* be top-dog, in all *that*." He expressively indicated the sky from horizon to horizon.

Sam Cordy grinned in the light of a passing lorry. "Romancer," he said. "Dreamer. How about a drink?"

They drank in the tiny bar at the end of the office buildings. When Nick left, he knew he had mentioned not one of the things which had brought him to see Sam. It had been too difficult to begin. Could he be certain he had not made a mistake? It seemed impossible to say. He got into the saloon, frowning.

CHAPTER II

BLUFF

NIORA was waiting and from her face he knew that the police had phoned. "They're *annoyed,* Nick," she said.

He hung up his hat, avoiding her clear, golden eyes. *Annoyed,* he thought. That meant they had found no body, either in the reference room or elsewhere. Quite likely Alf—the second Alf—had been waiting for them when they called.

"It was a silly mistake, dear," she had followed him into the living-room, her low voice puzzled. "They expect you to make a full statement first thing tomorrow."

Nick felt she needed some apparently logical explanation. He pulled a face. "Guess it does look silly, Niora. I suppose Alf was laid out with some kind of attack and I panicked."

He hoped she believed what he knew was a lie: Alf had been dead. Dead, with eyes glazed, heart still, and breathing halted forever.

He went to the window and looked out over the glowing city, not wanting to talk, or add further excuses. To talk of what he had seen would bring in Niora's father and he pre-

ferred she should not know that there, too, something he could not pretend to understand had happened.

A man was loitering in the street below. He looked up, counting the lighted windows as if to find one he knew, and an abrupt chill ran through Nick. He tensed, his gaze turned down to follow the man, now going on slowly. He had been big, with a dark hat and a slightly rolling step Nick would always remember.

"What is it, Nick?"

He felt Niora's hand on his arm, and turned away. No use to say that her father seemed to be watching below, he decided.

"It's nothing." He saw that his explanation about Alf had convinced her and he withdrew from the window, not wanting her to see—whatever it was that watched below. "I'll be working late, tonight. There are points I need to check."

He went into his study and locked the communicating door on the inside. The watcher outside could mean only one thing. *He was now on the list of the hunted.* To be with Niora endangered her, and her talking hindered thought.

He got a drink from his cupboard and examined the room. The window was fastened, and there was no balcony or ledge outside. One door went into their living-room; the other into the corridor common to all the suites, and both were locked. He put out the light and stood near the window. After a long time the figure came back, looked up, crossed the road, and disappeared below, going towards the entrance to the flats. Nick felt the hair on his neck crisp. Niora was playing the radio; music floated through into the study, and an abrupt announcement from a music-hall show, as she tuned in. He considered phoning the police, but decided they could not help him. What could he say? That Judge Henson, Niora's father and his life-long friend, intended to kill him—was not really Judge Henson at all, any longer? It would not pass.

A SOFT knock brushed the panels of the outer door. Nick started. crossed and dropped a hand on the knob.

"Who is it?" His palms were moist.

"Judge Henson."

The words were breathed as if not to disturb Niora. Nick hesitated, then snapped on the light and unlocked the door. The newcomer pushed himself silently in, walking heavily and looking at Nick under thick lids.

"I admire your courage, Riordan," he said. "But not your wisdom."

Nick locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Niora had turned the radio a little louder, and he was glad.

"Why my courage, Judge?" he asked, and sat down. There was no other name he could use.

"Because you know I am not Judge Henson."

The other lowered himself into the second chair and leaned back heavily. He took out a cigar and began to cut the end. Nick felt admiration, and used it to hide the fear he could not dispel.

"You do it—very well," he murmured.

The other nodded, dropping one eyelid in a mannerism which had been Henson's. "When big things are at stake the agents chosen are naturally —very competent, Riordan," he said drily. "That is why I do not admire your wisdom. You should not have admitted me."

"Perhaps I prefer to get things over; perhaps you underestimate me."

"The former I admit could be so. The latter, I doubt. Reliable agents do not underestimate an enemy." He exhaled smoke at the ceiling, fattening his round cheeks. Nick switched on the overhead light and watched him keenly.

"I had not imagined *Project 13* was in danger from anyone on Earth,"

he said. "We are united. It will benefit all, causing danger or loss to no one. I can't think anybody on Earth should wish to sabotage it..."

"You follow developments quickly." A smile was on the round face, but it lacked the essential quality which could have made it kindly. "You reason well. Nor can I think of any reason why anyone on Earth should wish to sabotage it, as you say."

Nick experienced a shock, though he knew that it had been this thought which had been creeping uncalled into his mind.

"You are—not of this Earth," he breathed.

"Obviously."

They looked at each other through the thin blue smoke, and Nick knew the other was more than human, if judged by standards he knew. Here was no mere disguise—the newcomer was a *duplicate* of Henson, and so perfect was that duplication it was unlikely anyone except himself and Niora would ever notice the difference. A new thought struck him coldly.

"What of Judge Henson?"

A STEADY hand deposited ash carefully in a tray. "His disposal was regrettable, but necessary. Individuals cannot be allowed to stand between us and our aim."

The eyes, cold as blue ice, settled on Nick. He felt that behind them was an intellect of extreme potential, whose reasoning processes were advanced beyond those of Earthmen, so that the unexpected was likely, bringing dangerous developments in quite unanticipated ways. The hand crushed out the cigar.

"Earth has reached a little too far towards the stars."

He got up heavily, his eyes not leaving Nick. Nick's flesh crept; he grated back his chair, remembering how Alf Somers had lain. There was a moment's silence in the radio program and he hoped his visitor would not speak. Niora was safe only so long as she did not know. Those who knew had to be eliminated. Music began again and the heavy form advanced.

"We do not wish to complicate matters by unnecessary deaths, Riordan."

Nick caught up his chair by its back and struck. It rebounded off an upraised forearm and the second arm lapped round his neck. He felt himself borne over backwards, and the chair was wrenched from his fingers. Two round eyes no longer like Henson's stared down into his, and the weight of the heavy body settled like a sack of grain on his chest. He wriggled violently, and his fingers closed round the neck overhanging him.

At the touch a nervous shock ran down through him. The neck was not like his own, but took on a feeling of unyeilding toughness with which he knew it useless to grapple. The muscles were strong and resistant, so that his grip seemed puny and helpless. He tore at the imprisoning arms. They, too, were so strong they felt like moulded steel, and one hand closed round his throat, squeezing, while the other poised a shining instrument over his one arm. The face began to lose its resemblance to Judge Henson, as if the imitative deception could not be maintained. The cheeks grew lean, the eyes calculating, and the mouth lost its fulness.

Nick kicked, freed a hand, and got one foot up and on the waistcoat. Using all his strength he flung the body up and away, and scrambled back, jumping to his feet, panting.

The radio had stopped. Niora's voice came through the door: "Is that you, Nick?"

Nick saw that his door-key was in the other's hands. With an odd rolling gait he reached the door, opened it quickly, and disappeared down the corridor. Nick went to the window, rubbing his throat.

Judge Henson came out of the en-

trance to the block, and disappeared briskly down the street.

"Anything the matter, Nick?"

He realised that Niora was rapping loudly on the door. He controlled his breathing, making his voice level—

"Nothing, dear. Only moving the furniture."

"Silly time to do it."

The radio began again. Nick locked the door and sat down, trembling from reaction. So that was the manner of beings they were up against, he thought. His visitor had certainly been higher on the evolutionary scale than himself. Had been physically superior, adaptive, intelligent, and could have ended the struggle effectively had he wished. He had gone away so that Niora should not know, not because he was beaten. Nick recalled his words to Sam Cordy, and shivered as he poured himself a stiff drink.

HE WENT out early, agreed he had been hasty in assuming his friend *dead*, made his statement and signed it. He learned that Somers had said he had been unwell. *Bluff*, Nick thought as he went into the street. *They* did not want the police to make troublesome investigations, preferring to play the game their own way. The fewer who suspected, the better: it would be fewer to eliminate. Nick had an old 208, relic of a war in which his father had served, rested heavily in his pocket. The elimination of undesirable elements could work both ways, he decided.

The blonde co-ordination clerk told him Alf Somers had come early and was in the astrogation cabin.

"Sam Cordy here?" he asked.

She looked at a card file and shook her head. "No, Mr. Riordan; he won't be in until noon."

He thanked her and got on a truck loaded with stores. *Project 13* was a high, silvery pillar pointing at grey morning skies. He left the truck at its base and entered the lift-cage, which whirred slowly up taut cables to the circular entrance lock. He paused on the narrow platform, looking down at the vehicles below and at the lines which radiated to the distant buildings; then, thin-lipped, he went into the vessel's interior.

It was a miracle of craftmanship, he thought as he rode up in the central lift. Engines filled nearly one third of the ship's bulk, and stores a second third. The remainder housed living-quarters and apparatus—mostly the latter. *Project 13* was a self-contained laboratory, equipped to locate and examine the planets which circled distant suns. Once out there in the mighty vastness of space she would have to be self-supporting, and her designers intended that she should make a round trip through the heavens, with reserve power for several planetary landings.

The new Alf Somers was sitting on a mushroom stool before an instrument panel, and got up as he entered.

"How do, Nick?" The mobile face grinned.

Nick entered stiffly and saw that a wireman was working on cables under a panel near the door.

"You're here early, Alf," he said, his face bleak as he eyed the other across the six feet of free floor space.

The light blue eyes mocked him. "Another mistake like last night, Nick, and you'll find yourself sent down for psychopathical adjustment."

True, thought Nick. And the words were a threat: the alien knew who held the superior position. Nick had no proof if he made an accusation. He smiled, his limbs like ice and his grip on the old 208 in his pocket so hard it hurt.

"I should scarcely make the same mistake twice," he murmured.

The wireman came from under the panel, gave them a passing glance, and went out. Nick closed the door and stood with his back to it. His expression changed to hate; his eyes snapped.

"What did you do with Alf?"

THE EXPRESSION on the mobile face was characteristic still. The red hair was brushed back exactly as Alf would have done it. Nick reminded himself of what he had seen in the reference room, almost imagining that he had dreamed up the whole thing. But the other shrugged—

"Need you know what we did with him?"

"Perhaps it doesn't matter." Nick was glad pretence had ceased. "Remember I *know*. Alf didn't—"

"What makes you think he didn't?"

Nick shivered. He had told no one because they would not believe. He had supposed his friend had not known. It was unnerving to realise that Alf might have suspected something, and kept it to himself for that same reason. The thought chilled and only the hard feel of the 208 in his pocket quieted his panic.

"I could kill you," he said thinly.

"You could try."

"Then why aren't you afraid?"

"It should be obvious the agents of a whole galaxy are not going to allow their lives to depend upon such a slender chance—" The other got off the stool. "Our preparations were in no way incomplete."

Nick's finger squeezed the trigger; once, twice, and a third time. The weapon kicked. Three holes appeared in the breast of the blue overall and three bullets shattered apparatus behind. The face so like Alf's only twitched, and Nick's grip on his weapon relaxed.

"Do not always evaluate more advanced life forms by your own poor biological standards." There was reproach in the words and tone.

Nick jumped back through the door and ran; he trembled as he rode down in the elevator, and knew he was white as he reached the circular lock and took the external cage to ground level. There, he gained full control of himself and went on one of the trucks to the office buildings. In the co-ordination office the girl stopped him.

"The chairman of the Board will want to speak to you, Mr. Riordan."

"Why?" he snapped.

"Mr. Somers has reported that while showing him a souvenir in the astrogation cabin you damaged some of the instruments."

She looked at him queerly, and Nick shurgged. The phone call from *Project 13* had apparently preceded him by several minutes.

"Quite an accident," he said.

He saw that he would have to be doubly careful; things like this, after reporting Somers dead, gave a bad impression. He went on into a call-booth and dialed Sam Cordy's number. After a long interval Sam's voice came over the line.

"Listen," Nick pleaded. "I want to talk. Can I come round?"

Sam seemed to be considering. "I'm on at noon, Nick," he said at last. "It's ten-thirty now."

"That gives us an hour!"

"Not so fast! I've got a journey out of town first. I don't think I can make it."

Nick felt sweat on his palms. "Sam, this is important!"

"So is my trip, Nick. Alf asked me to slip down to his place to bring up some charts he left there last night."

Nick found himself staring at a dead phone, and he replaced it automatically. Sam's statement might mean exactly what it said. Again, it might not....

CHAPTER III

NOR WOULD BELIEVE

NICK CAME out from the Board meeting with his ears red. It had been in session when his action was reported and he had hurriedly been added to the agenda. The Chairman had been stern and fully aware of his enormous responsibility.

"We feel you are aware of the

vessel's importance too, Riordan," he concluded. "For the first time men will travel more than mere planetary distances. You realise no thoughtlessness must be allowed to jeopardise this vast undertaking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We hope nothing further of this nature will arise."

Nick had left under the eagle scrutiny of the twenty directors. By the office clock he saw that he had been delayed an hour, and the clerk at the entrance desk stopped him.

"Mr. Cordy tried to phone you, Mr. Riordan. Said it was urgent. I said you were being interviewed and the Board left strict orders there be no interruption."

Nick swore to himself. "Did he leave a message?"

"No, Mr. Riordan. He seemed anxious, and said we must realise we had to fight for survival." She looked puzzled. "I thought perhaps you would understand."

So Sam *knew*, Nick thought with excitement. He could mean only that.

"Where was the call from?" he asked quickly.

"Mr. Somers' house, sir."

"I see."

He went out, irritated that the call had to come when he was before the Board. He would have given ten years of his life to have been there to answer Sam, he decided. If he had ten years.... He wondered exactly how much Sam knew. It was galling to have missed him; yet wonderful to know he did not stand alone any longer.

He went home and ate. When they were drinking the coffee Niora looked across the table at him, her golden eyes puzzled.

"I rang up Dad this morning."

Nick felt his muscles tense. He put his cup down slowly.

"Yes?" Those who did not know were safe, he thought. Did Niora know?

"He seemed a trifle odd, Nick." She frowned. "Nothing I could really put a finger on."

"Odd?" He tested the extent of her suspicion, hoping she knew nothing.

"Yes, Nick. He was coming round this evening and I wanted to ask what time. But he says now he isn't coming."

Nick felt relief like cool water through his veins. Apparently the being who had become Judge Henson did not want Niora to suspect: those who suspected had to be eliminated, and too many eliminations might cause enquiries. The smaller the circle was, the greater were chances of success. It would not require much deduction to decide that he would never tell Niora what he knew.

"Perhaps he was busy," Nick breathed, and wondered how long the deception could continue. A time would come when the truth would out.

After the meal he rang up the project site and asked for Sam Cordy. He heard a connection put through to the co-ordination clerk.

"He's not back, Mr. Riordan," she said. "He reported urgent personal business but left no number where he might be contacted."

Nick bit his lips. "Thanks. If he appears, have him ring me."

"Certainly, Mr. Riordan."

He sat in silence, wondering whether Sam was following some line on his own. His eyes strayed to the clock. The new Alf Somers would be going off duty within the hour. That left time, Nick decided. He would go down to the little white and red house and investigate....

COOL EVENING wind came down off the blue hills. The sun was gone, and the white and red house had drawn shadows closely about itself. Nick stopped the saloon behind thin elms and looked down across the slopes at the unlit windows. No smoke rose from the chimney; nor was there movement inside or in the garden, or

on the gravel drive that came out to the road. It was lonely, he thought, not moving. Time was, when men had hastened to congregate in populous cities; but Alf Somers had preferred solitude—and that well suited those who had come.

He got out and went down along the road and quietly into the end of the gravel drive. Abruptly he wondered at the odd stillness. The air itself seemed to have become a vacuum that conducted no sound, and when he stepped through the gate his shoes on the gravel were like steel on crackling ice. Under the beeches soft turf cushioned his feet, and he went in a long curve towards the still house.

It was silent; seemed empty. Behind, the garden sloped down to a narrow strip of grass, ending in willows and a stream. He went under the willows, listening, and stopped. Below, gleaming in the water, was a pile of canisters. Looking down, he knew them to contain food. They were unopened and the manufacturer's name gleamed up golden through the water. A tiny fear crept into being on his back; he looked behind, but the garden was empty. His gaze returned to the canisters. A little way below, sodden in the water, were three loaves. He bent down to stare, and tiny fish flicked from them away into reeds.

He straightened, and knew that his face was white. The grocer who had supplied Alf Somers made his deliveries as usual—but those who had come did not need such food. Bent plants showed where the new Alf Somers had passed down from the house.

Chilled, Nick went slowly among the trees towards the house. He remembered what Sam Cordy had phoned so urgently. The time had come when man must again fight for survival. Man was no longer the creature best adapted and superior. Time was, when he had been that. But things had changed. And how few knew, Nick thought uneasily; so insidious was the enemy, people did not know, *nor would believe,* that an enemy had indeed come.

He halted in cover, looking across at the house. The evening sky was dark and the wind hushed. A tremor born of some indefinable but extreme unease passed through him. The sky was dark: was deep-purple—except for one point immediately over the house. A faint golden disc glowed there, radiating thin streamers that seemed to flow from it up into the heavens. Faint as a sunbeam, it floated silently, and as Nick looked through it he seemed to be looking into a tube that gave a view of the star-pricked, empty backdrop of space, and of a vessel awesomely large, circular, flattened and spinning slowly on its axis as it moved against the stars. He went cautiously nearer, scarcely breathing, and the view snapped from vision. He halted and stepped back. It reappeared. In the distance of a single pace it came and went from view, and mid-way, moving his head cautiously, he found a spot where the golden disc seemed to break up into a wildly spinning toothed wheel, beyond which moved triangular segments of the saucer-shaped vessel. Only at one spot was there a clear view where by some odd chance a focus arose between his own world of three-dimensional space, and the unknown and incomprehensible time-space continuum in which the alien vessel existed. Voices sounded, growing louder, and passed as three men went along the road, cycling quickly and momentarily visible between the trees. They could see nothing, Nick decided. The golden disc was visible only from this one point.

He went cautiously towards the house, keeping from view, and reached the wall near a back window which he knew had no fastening. Alf had taken the broken latch off two weeks before and never replaced it. He pushed it open cautiously and looked through, then vaulted inside. A faint humming

which came from upstairs attracted him, and he crept up, listening at every step. The humming came from behind a partly-open door. With infinite caution he opened it and looked in.

A compact apparatus, lifted from its case, rested on a chair and hummed and sang softly like taut wires in the wind. A radiance rose from it towards the ceiling, where the plaster and old-fashioned beams trembled before his eyes as if seen through rippling water. Nick thought of the shimmering golden disc above the house, and his tense attention quickened. For a long time he studied the apparatus, dropping to his knees to peer closely into its intricate interior, but not touching it. When at last he rose a deep ridge stood between his brows, but his eyes shone with inner light. He had an excellent memory for technicalities and the principle circuits were engraved on his mind.

NIORA RIORDAN frowned at the litter of equipment on the lounge table, as if annoyed that their room had become a workshop. Nick wiped his brow and sat back, sighing. His coat hung on the chair, and he saw that he had worked for three hours without pause. Niora looked at the shining chassis, with its countless connections and components.

"What does it do, Nick?"

"I don't know, Niora. I can only guess." He switched off the table-lamp. He could be wrong—and explanations would lead to knowledge dangerous to Niora herself. "It's just a copy of a unit I saw somewhere."

"Not anything to do with the project?"

He shook his head. "Such work wouldn't be done like this."

He was not sure whether she was satisfied, and knew better than to underestimate her. Niora had a habit of worrying at a problem until she found a solution; this time he hoped that she did not even suspect there was a problem.

"The vessel's really finished?" she asked.

Nick wondered whether this was a continuation of her original subject. "*Project 13?* Yes, except for a few finishing touches of no great importance."

"She will travel faster than light?"

"If you care to express it like that. We prefer to say that she will cease to exist in this time-space continuum. Without that, her crew would need half a lifetime to make the trip."

His gaze flickered to the apparatus he was building, which he had mentally classified in the bedroom when he had seen its original and his first puzzlement changed slowly to comprehension. Though obviously designed by a race whose technological knowledge exceeded Earth levels, it embodied no completely new technique. It was the unification of known techniques in a new and unexpected manner.

He tidied up and put the uncompleted space-continuum distorter into a large suitcase. The phone rang as he finished, and he took it up.

"Is that Sam Cordy?"

He regretted his words immediately and wondered whether he had been unwise. A level voice said: "No, Alf here."

Alf, Nick thought bitterly. Not *Alf*, but...

"Yes," he said, and saw Niora was listening. "Oh, Alf, what is it?"

"I'd like to see you."

How well it was done, Nick thought. His fingers tightened imperceptibly on the phone. "I can call any time you like, Alf." That let Niora know where he was going, without needing to say anything and so make a point of it so that she asked questions. If anything *—happened*—it might be useful for her to know.

"Right, I'll be at the site in half an hour." He hung up.

CHAPTER IV

A MR. SANEDRIN

THE LIGHT-BLUE eyes met Nick's. "So you see your continued interference cannot be permitted. It is unfortunate, but necessary."

A group of wiremen were talking by the bar; otherwise sat at the small tables, drinking coffee and smoking. Nick felt a cold finger pass up and down his spine.

"It will be arranged in such a way as to cause no suspicion," the other said.

Nick looked at him. Behind the eyes was an expression which would never have appeared in Alf's face. Except for that he might have been with Alf.

"We have never harmed you," Nick pointed out evenly.

The other emptied his glass smoothly. "You would do so. No, not purposely, but because it is your nature. A century ago you reached adjacent planets and civilised them. Very well, they benefited in some ways. But we are not anxious to be victims of the same process. You merely want to travel farther and faster; build higher and bigger. The only time you approach contentment is when you are striving to attain some ideal—which is in itself a form of discontent." He filled his glass, pushed it to one side, and leaned forwards, pointing a finger at Nick. "*We* are content, wishing only to remain as we are. *Project* 13 gives you the means to reach our worlds. We do not wish to be colonised. We do not want a senseless, useless trade as you scratch our planets for the metals you term valuable, or pick our brains for processes you can apply to your own industries."

Nick felt his spirits sinking. "I cannot believe *Project 13* is such a threat to you."

"It is. We have ways of knowing."

Nick did not argue. Everything he had so far seen indicated the other was a member of a race technically far advanced beyond Earth level. He did not doubt that they had—ways of knowing.

"As your superiors, we are not prepared to let you undermine our stable society," the other said quietly, his gaze now upon the table. "Man, represented by you and your fellows, is not high in the evolutionary scale. We have superior intellects, and superior bodies, both obtained through selective genetical control, with some surgical intervention. Your bodies depend upon each individual part. We have arranged that ours do not."

"I could disclose what you are!" Nick interrupted.

The blue eyes passed over the tables and bar. "Try, if you wish."

NICK KNEW his statement had been bluff. No one would believe him; no one would even bother to examine the man so apparently Alf Somers.

"No ordinary examination would reveal that we are different." The other seemed to have followed his thoughts. "You would find it very difficult to convince anyone."

"So you will smash *Project 13?*" Nick asked thinly.

"Yes, but not so obviously as you suggest. Preliminary tests will make it apparent that the vessel is unworkable, and that the design is not practicable."

Nick nodded slowly. That was the way they would do it. "Why tell me all this?" he asked.

"Because the fewer who suspect our presence, the fewer who suspect deaths will arise." He leaned forwards and his gaze locked with Nick's. "Have you told anyone of your suspicions? Acquaintances, or your wife?"

The eyes held latent power and Nick knew that concealment would have been impossible. No one could have

passed this scrutiny. Luckily, he did not need to lie—

"I've told no one," he said.

"Good." Nick saw how confident of his ability to remain undeceived the other had been. "That's all, Riordan. Goodbye."

Nick rose stiffly, wondering what had been planned. It would be something quite unexpected, and likely to cause the minimum of suspicion. The beings from the circular ship did not want curiousity aroused.

He went through the crowd to the door, suddenly awake to the danger which had always surounded him, but which now had a different meaning. Death was a thing that happened to other people, it had seemed, until now.... Trucks were backing into a yard adjoining the offices and he waited until they had gone, his hair prickling and his hands damp in his pockets. A track-rod could break, or a driver accelerate carelessly.

He gained the door of his own small private office, and looked back across the concrete square. The second Alf Somers was watching him from outside the refreshment room. Nick shivered involuntarily, entered his office and locked the door. He seated himself, his plan crystallising, and reached for the control switch of his tape-recorder. Sam Cordy suspected, he thought. He could put everything he knew on the tape and have it passed on to Sam....

His finger stopped an inch from the switch—insulation *could* break down; shorts *could* arise. It would not be the first time a man had been electrocuted like that. He depressed the switch with a rubber eraser and the recorder began to run. He relaxed imperceptibly and began to talk into the desk mike, marshalling his facts. Those who had come intended to make *Project 13* look a failure. The new Alf Somers and Judge Henson were spies of a kind never fought before....

When he had finished he saw that almost an hour had gone. He ran back the tape on to an empty spool, placed it in a large envelope, and tied it. The less important it appeared, the better, he decided, and wrote on it: "For Sam Cordy," and in brackets: "Remember our party, Sam?" That should do, he thought. Sam would be curious, and play the tape.

The phone rang. He picked it up and found the site gatekeeper had been put through.

"A man here keeps saying he must see you, sir."

Nick frowned. "Who is he?"

"A Mr. Sanedrin."

Nick's frown dispersed. The name was familiar, yet one he did not completely recognise.

"Shall I send him away, sir?" The gatekeeper sounded as if he had endured a long and tiring argument. "Or will you see him?"

Nick considered quickly. Every step now seemed full of imminent personal danger. "Have him brought in," he decided at last. "Take the usual precautionary measures, of course."

He rang off and settled back to wait. The site was ringed by an electrified fence, as securely guarded as when top-secret military preparations were conducted in time of war. Sanedrin would be brought in under open guard. He repeated the name, and his brows suddenly rose. Niora's radio program had included Sanedrin The Seer! That was why the name was familiar.

KNOCKING vibrated the door, and he admitted a little man, dark and quick, who bowed as if to an audience. But a keen look of inner tension was in the black eyes, which flickered round the office and returned to Nick.

"I intrude, Mr. Riordan." He made an expressive gesture, hunching up his shoulders and raising his palms. "But I presumed you would consider the intrusion justified."

Nick examined him as he closed the door. "I've heard you on the radio,"

he said. "Seen you on TV, too, now I think of it."

Long, delicately white fingers flitted up to a silk bow-tie and Sanedrin's head bobbed as if he demonstrated some trick to an admiring audience. He produced a card as from nowhere, and Nick looked down at it.

Sanedrin looked momentarily uncomfortable. "One must live, Mr. Riordan. There are times when I have —felt things strongly. I employ trickery: I admit it to you. But there were times when I did not debase my powers to obtain definite results. Program managers expect—such results."

Nick felt his interest quicken. He saw that the newcomer's manner, automatic in its showmanship, only half-concealed a grave inner tension. He nodded encouragingly.

"I had a dream, Mr. Riordan, a dream." Recalling it caused pain to flicker across the thin, dark face. "It resembled those I experienced before I had debased my art for money. There was vision of the long, East road through the green-belt; of a saloon, and a passenger vehicle, both crushed like paper. Of faces I knew—one I had seen in newscasts about this great vessel." He waved towards the project rocket, just visible through the window. "Your face, Mr. Riordan. The feeling was so strong I could not quell it. I had to tell you..."

He ended lamely and Nick saw how difficult it had been for him to make such a point of a thing most men would laugh into silence. Instinctively he pressed the other's shoulder.

"You've done a great service by telling me that—perhaps a greater service than you'll ever know."

When he was alone Nick sat pondering on the desk. He had planned to take the East road that evening, ending up at the little white and red house. There could be an accident. His saloon might be crushed like an eggshell by one of the fast articulated passenger vehicles which swept along the arterial road. It seemed possible that the—*newcomers* to Earth could engineer just such an accident....

THE SUITE was locked and Nick let himself in. A note was propped on the table and he opened it with sudden apprehension.

Gone round to see Daddy as you said you might be late—Niora

The paper trembled in Nick's fingers and he folded it automatically. This, he thought, he had dreaded yet expected. He gnawed a lip, then dialled Judge Henson's number. He rang twice, with no result, and hung up. He frowned, then asked the project site co-ordinating office for Sam Cordy. Sam had not been in.

Frustrated, he went down to the sub-level garage. One thing seemed clear. Everything centred on Alf's house, and that was where he would go. He had got into the saloon before he remembered his visitor at the office and his warning. Both had been crowded from his mind by his fear for Niora.

He swore to himself, slammed the door, and went up to street level. Articulated six-wheeled buses, roomy and silent, were on their evening routes through the green belt. He got a ticket from the slot-machine at a halt barrier. A vehicle which would take him by Alf's was stopping, but he froze. Sanedrin had not said he was in the *saloon!* The same accident could arise if he was a passenger in the articulated bus, and with fatal results.

He watched it leave, and turned back to the flat. Suddenly it seemed dangerous to be out at all. Possibly *they* had engineered the whole thing, beginning the plan with a call supposedly from Judge Henson, to take Niora away. It was not difficult to deduce that he would then phone Henson's number, get no reply, and decide to go to the white and red house where everything had begun.

He paced the flat in indecision,

twice rang Henson's number, and twice asked for Sam Cordy, all without result. He wondered whether he should risk the drive out to Alf's. The clock chimed ten and he switched on the newscast, wondering if there *had* been an accident....

There had. A saloon had crashed into an articulated bus travelling east, and seven passengers had been killed on its near side as it mounted the path, sheared off two trees, and toppled down the embankment into a park. "Among the killed was the well-known universal network artist Sanedrin The Seer," the announcer said. "His death will give a feeling of personal loss to many of our listeners."

Nick struck off the radio and stared from the window, not seeing the city lights, his face suddenly like weathered brown stone. He always sat on the near side. Blue, gold, red and green were reflected on his concave cheeks and in his eyes as an advertiser's legend spelled itself along the building opposite. Immobile with thought, he stood outlined by the brilliance of the city below. All this, he thought, made by man for man, was in danger. And the eager people did not *know*. His gaze turned sideways. The beacon lights still burned on the point of *Project 13*. For a moment he had almost expected they might have been gone. He wondered whether he should go to Judge Henson's. *That* journey could be taken on foot, and should be safe.

HE WENT down and through the busy streets, where folks always hurried, but only to entertainment, at this hour. Every building blazed with lights; neons of every natural colour, plus some devised by man, zig-zagged their abrupt messages, then disappeared into momentary blackness. Cartoon figures bowed and gesticulated, comic-strips flashed through brief-lived sequences, and behind all was the sound of many vehicles and the voices of many people. Many laughed; most were gay. Only at Nick's heels did danger seem to walk and he often looked back quickly.

He went down side streets between high buildings, and came out upon a boulevard with fountains playing along its centre. He wondered whether Sam Cordy had received the tape. Probably. And Sam had suspected something himself, Nick felt sure. The knowledge that Sam knew, and would help, comforted him.

Judge Henson's house was beyond a second intersection. He crossed under the trees and slowed his step, eyes and ears alert. A man with a package under one arm was standing motionless outside Judge Henson's gate, his back to Nick. Nick felt excitement and relief. The little package *might* have been anything: but its size and shape suggested recorder tape. And the man, characteristically without a hat, was unmistakable. Nick's step quickened, a sudden fear coming into his mind. His hand fell upon the waiting man's arm—

"Sam! You haven't told Judge Henson what was on the tape?"

The man jerked round; street lights shone on his bare, sandy head, and rounded, boyish face. A smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Nick! This is a lucky chance. What brings you here?"

Nick froze. His nails bit into his palms. His mind cried out, and his lips almost followed as hope died. Alf Somers; Judge Henson; now—outside Henson's house—

"What have you done with Sam?" he said thinly.

Brows exactly like Sam's rose quizzically. *How well you do it,* Nick thought bitterly. The other transferred the package to a wide pocket.

"That's a question we prefer not to answer," he said.

Nick was glad there was no attempt to maintain the deception. He knew that perhaps everyone except himself would believe this man to be Sam Cordy, and only a sixth-sense whispered he was *not*.

"Are there—scores of you?" he asked, his lips tight.

The man who looked like Sam Cordy smiled. "That, again, is a question we prefer not to answer."

Nick felt baffled; his gaze turned to the house, but no lights illuminated the windows. His dismay became anger.

"What have you done with Niora? She came here."

Shoulders rose and fell but the second Sam Cordy did not speak. Nick's blood ran hot in fury, then cold at the look in the other's eyes.

"You're—*devils*," he said.

"The desire to survive is a hard taskmaster. Other things become secondary to it. I thought the matter very clearly put." He tapped his pocket where the package rested.

A LIGHT suddenly came on in the hall-way above and the door was opened from inside. A large man speaking with Judge Henson's voice stood momentarily outlined; a girl came past him, adjusting her hat and exchanging farewells. Nick's heart stood still: Niora! By some miracle she had not noticed the change in her father; by the ultimate lucky chance was coming out now, unharmed—not in danger, because she did not suspect...

She came half way down the steps, saw Nick, hesitated, then smiled. Her eyes turned to the second Sam Cordy and she nodded.

"Hello, Sam."

Nick, all his consciousness centered on her, felt new fear dawn in his mind. He stepped forward, looking up, his face white and abruptly aged.

"Niora—?"

"I'm coming home right now, Nick."

●

His fear became a live thing, crawling through his consciousness. Here were Niora's face and form; her voice and gestures. Yet though they were the color, he knew the soft golden eyes looking into his were not his wife's.

"What have you done with Niora?" he whispered, agonised.

The golden eyes turned upon the man like Sam Cordy, and the latter shrugged. Both stood, not speaking, looking at him, and something in Nick snapped. He turned and ran. His steps echoed from the residential buildings, and as he ran he knew, now, what form his *accident* would take. As far as the world knew, there would still be a Nick Riordan. That would make the circle complete—Alf, the Judge, Sam, Niora, and himself. Perhaps no other human would ever know.

He halted at the first junction, listening, but no steps followed. They had either decided it was unnecessary to give chase, or were following silently. He thought of Niora, and a cold fury grew within him as he went on quickly, his face white and bleak in the street lights, not hearing the careless voices of the people in the wide street beyond the junction.

People must *know*, he thought. They could not overcome an enemy they did not realise existed. The newcomers had worked secretly, and obviously valued secrecy so much they would go to any lengths to maintain it. The greatest weapon to turn against them would be mass publicity—and there was one man alone who could use that weapon most effectively and without delay. Nick's hurrying feet turned towards the city centre. That man was Marsh Wallace, of the universal network news syndicate.

CHAPTER V

WHITE AND RED HOUSE

MEN CAME and went through the offices. In three-sided cubicles columnists and feature-writers mapped into tape-ma-

chines; youths hurried by with copy, and a continuous drone of activity filled all the long rooms. Nick knew he had only been admitted because *Project 13* was always news, and because his name, like that of the others who held important positions in the project-site offices, was known. He passed though a frosted door lettered "Marsh Wallace" and quiet came as it closed behind him. From his broad circular desk a man with a wide, brown face looked up. He made a sign of recognition, drew a file towards him from a side swivel, and leaned back, staring at Nick from under his eye-shield. He indicated a chair.

"I was told you wanted an appointment, Riordan." His voice was clipped, staccato and clear above the quiet hum filtering from the outer offices.

Nick sat down. He knew his face showed the heavy strain he was enduring and the look that had been in the golden eyes so like Niora's still remained in his memory.

"You've always covered the news relating to the project," he said.

Marsh Wallace nodded, his gaze keenly appraising. "I have. No project site item is used until approved by me."

He was abrupt and impersonal and Nick wished he knew Wallace better—that would make things easier and more certain. But their acquaintance was slight and Wallace had already looked quickly at the clock, where a red second-hand turned relentlessly.

"The project is being sabotaged," Nick said quietly. "There is real danger to the ship."

He would have to choose his words carefully; any appearance of panic would only hinder him. Wallace's face was slightly down-turned, his eyes hidden behind the eye-shield as he leafed the pages of the file.

"There have been other reports of that, in the past," he said without modulation to reveal his thoughts. "All proved unfounded—were mere suspicion or rumor."

"This is *not* rumor!"

Wallace nodded, not looking up. "So you say. I should need proof before I passed a story. Universal network news does not favor sensationalism. No story goes from this office without my permission, and I pass no story until I am satisfied it is based on truth."

He glanced up quickly and Nick found himself meeting dark, cool eyes. He had heard that Wallace was a man of inhuman efficiency, and knew that without his aid the story he wished to tell would die unpublished. If Wallace decided against it, no one would ever know....

The cool, dark eyes strayed again to the clock with momentary impatience. "Tell me the facts as you believe them."

Nick hesitated, searching for words and realising just how unconvincing his story could appear. Wallace must have listened to many fake sensationalists in his long, busy life; must indeed have shown many protesting to the door.

WALLACE leaned back as Nick finished. "An odd story, Riordan."

Nick tried to read the expression in the cool, dark eyes, and failed.

"It's true!"

"So you have said." Wallace consulted the file silently and his gaze flicked up. "I see you had reported the death of a co-worker, Alfred Somers, but that he was later found well."

"I've explained that!" Nick felt his spirits sink again. "The person everyone believes to be Alf is really one of them!"

"You say the similarity is exact?"

"Yes."

"Then you can offer no proof?"

Nick was silent. There was no proof, he thought. He *knew*. That was

all. Just knowing was not enough for Wallace.

"It might he possible for you to see the alien vessel above Alf's house," he decided at last.

Wallace appeared to consider. "You can guarantee I should see it?" he asked finally.

Nick hesitated. "No."

"Then I can hardly come. I want the promise of definite proof—*proof*." He closed the file with a snap. "Proof, not rumor. Fact not possibility. If I ran a story like this and it was faked, I should be out. Out. Yes, even I. The universal network does not encourage mistakes."

Nick saw that his interview was closed. He leaned over the desk, his eyes agonised and his face set.

"You ask for *proof* while Earth is jeopardised!"

Marsh Wallace pressed a stud on his desk and nodded at the door, as it opened to disclose a youth in shirtsleeves.

"Show Mr. Riordan out," he said.

Nick looked back from the door. "At least promise you'll not forget what I have said!"

Wallace was jotting something on a slip of paper. He made a tiny motion with his head, hut Nick did not know whether it was in assent or curt dismissal, and he went out through the offices and into the street. The midnight sky was high and clear, and passing vehicles and people reduced to a fraction of their earlier volume. Many windows were dark; only from the great news syndicate building glared unbroken rows of lights, showing dawn would see material ready to pour through the thousand channels afforded by radio, television and the press. That news would contain no item of the threat from outside, Nick thought bitterly. Marsh Wallace would spike it, waiting for proof when none could be found.

Nick felt exhausted when he reached his rooms. Someone was moving inside, humming quietly in a voice which sounded like Niora's. His face thin and his lips compressed, he let himself into the study and locked the door. Niora's voice did not come, calling him, and he did not speak, hut dropped the couch end and lay down to rest. At last, after a long time, the voice that sounded so exactly like Niora's grew quiet and Nick strove to sleep, his mind and body demanding rest. He wondered what had happened to Niora and the others. There seemed only one possibility: they were dead. At last he slept uneasily.

HE AWOKE after what seemed moments and heard the end of the early newscast coming from the next room. "...The body has been identified as Alfred Somers, a technician at the *Project 13* site. It is reported death appears to have taken place some days ago, though Somhers has been seen recently."

The radio was silenced and footsteps went into the bedroom. Nick got up. So Alf was dead, he thought, and shivered, recalling the other three people who had been substituted.

As he went down to street level he decided the police would now wish to question him again. The discovery of Alf's body altered things. He wondered whether those responsible for its disposal had made a mistake; whether there was some purpose in this development, or if it would throw suspicion on himself. The police might assume he knew more than he said, and he might be held for questioning. There could even be a case against him, he thought, if evidence turned out that way.

He stopped at the exit to the flats. Judge Henson was down the road. Nick glanced the other way quickly. The new Sam Cordy was coming from the other direction, and as if the two were aware of each other's presence despite intervening traffic and dis-

tance, Henson began to come with his characteristic rolling gait, heavy yet purposeful, towards the flat. Nick started and ran back lightly to the lift. Only when he had got out at his floor did he realise that there was no safety here. Sounds of movement came from inside his rooms, and a voice like Niora's was singing softly to itself.

The indicator showed the lift was coming up. He sprinted for the stairway, and looked down. Judge Henson was mounting rapidly, and without breathlessness, despite his weight and the stiff climb. Nick turned the other corner and began to run up the stairs. There was only one lift and one stairway, and the building stood isolated from those around. They had come for him, and would apparently succeed.

He gained the flat roof with its tiny garden from which there could be no escape. From its edge he saw that something was happening in the streets below. People hurried, or talked in groups, and traffic seemed momentarily disorganised. A confused murmur drifted up; a news delivery van had stopped at a corner and the papers were passing quickly through the crowd. Somewhere a news reproducer was trumpeting, but the words echoed across the road and were unintelligible. Nick strained his eyes down from the corner of the building. Several minutes passed, then a tiny group came from the flat, walking quickly. The new Cordy, Henson, and Niora....

Nick went down into the top floor corridor. The lift was at ground level and would not rise. He took the stairway, reached his rooms and found them empty. He hesitated, wondering what had happened, and switched on to the news band. "These startling revelations by Marsh Wallace were as unexpected as they were amazing." The announcer's voice seemed to hint at personal panic. "A report was made by two *Project 13* operatives—Nick Riordan and Sam Cordy. Cordy's written report has only come to hand immediately before this bulletin, confirming Riordan's remarkable statement, made in person to Marsh Wallace late last night. Further confirmation arises in the fact that autopsy reveals Alfred Somers met his death over thirty hours ago, while many reliable witnesses state he was seen yesterday evening on the project sit."

As he listened Nick thought of the enormous vessel he had seen above Alf's house, and of the technological superiority of the beings who operated it, and a new unease replaced his momentary triumph. Anyone who *knew* was in danger: Now, *everyone* knew! Many further developments would certainly center around Alf's little white and red house!

CHAPTER VI

LIKE OTHER SAVAGES

MUCH TRAFFIC was on the road and three military vans passed Nick, the soldiers in them riding expressionlessly. He wondered if chance alone took them East with him. He drove fast, not thinking of individual danger, and the green belt slid away behind. The saloon mounted the hills effortlessly, sped into the top roads, and he came out upon the far hillside. His gaze flickered immediately across the valley.

A transparent dome centered on the little white and red house and enclosed a large part of the undulated slopes around, including a section of the near-by road. Nick braked quickly to a stop at the road-side, where other vehicles had parked, and gazed down over the wooded hillsides. The dome looked like glass with a faint yellowish hue. It was absolutely spherical, an seemed to have shorn through the trees and hedges at its perimeter. Inside, the house and garden stood like minute toys in a huge bubble.

A police car came up the road, an urgent, amplified voice halting traffic and turning idle sightseers hack. Nick drove the saloon quickly into an unused lane and got out. With the heavy suitcase he had brought in one hand, he set off tangentially across the fields towards the dome. He had expected things to happen, but scarcely this.

The military trucks had stopped high ahove him on the hills and the soldiers got out, staring down across the fields and talking. An officer in a radio-car came; they saluted, then all gazed again down into the valley.

Nick went along hehind a high hedge, and through trees. A faint humming, almost inaudihle, came from the dome—a sound he considered very like that which had come from the space-distorter. No one was visible inside, though he could hear a man shouting far away up on the hills behind him, and he drew near to the golden wall, which stretched high above the trees. It shimmered and moved so that it was difficult for his eyes to focus upon it, and he put down his heavy case and opened it.

The apparatus he had built was a replica of that he had seen in the hedroom. He suspected what it might do, but hesitated, thinking of Niora, Sam and Alf, before depressing the switch. Very slowly a humming that chimed and blended with that of the dome came from the case. An area of the dome immediately in front of him scintillated and abruptly vanished, the jagged edges drawing back, curling and twisting. Smoke began to rise from the suitcase and Nick sprinted for the gap. An abrupt, quick thunderclap of displaced air came at his heels, and he rolled upon the grass, looking back. The suitcase was hurning brightly, its contents fused from the overload, and the interrupted edge of the dome had snapped hack into existence. He got up slowly. High overhead the sky had an oddly different tint. In the center, directly over the house and dimly-seen as behind mist, floated the huge, circular vessel Nick had glimpsed once before from the garden. As he gazed at it, his ears still ringing, powerful arms fastened themselves round him, pinioning him.

INSIDE THE house the furniture had been hastily cleared from one room and a complex chair stood centrally under a powerful light. In it was strapped a man with a wide, hrown face, his head in a curved rest, his eyes closed in unconsciousness. Around him moved three figures, their true features still concealed by a fading resemblance to those they had imitated. A man who had once appeared fat and aged but whose face was taking on youthful lines delicately manipulated the controls on the headpiece above the chair. Probes scarcely more than a molecule in diameter sank down through skull and hrain. Never hurrying, and with infinite care, he proceeded, not looking up, his thickly lidded eyes keenly on his apparatus.

From his chair Nick watched, eyes sometimes on the three and sometimes on the unconscious Marsh Wallace. He had ceased trying to struggle.

"This means one of us will have to stay behind as Marsh Wallace," one of the three said.

The heavy man by the headpiece sank another probe. "You believe it will he possible to kill this disclosure of our presence?"

"Of course. Those who saw nothing will not believe in it. Even those who have seen the dome will begin to dishelieve their own senses. It can be dismissed an an illusion, an atmospheric phenomenon, or the result of some experiment heing carried on in Somers' laboratory."

Nick tried once again to move, hut could not. The use had not yet returned to his numbed muscles, which were frozen and useless from a drug he did not understand.

"It is unfortunate you needed to put on the continuum distorter," the big man said.

"It was necessary—we should have been over-run by police and soldiers. You think me most suited to take Wallace's position?"

"We do."

"Very well."

The second donned a headpiece joined to that above the central chair and Nick watched it being adjusted. Apparatus began to murmur and Marsh Wallace's features twitched as if in sleep. Nick closed his eyes, trying to overcome the dizziness left by the hypnotic. It had all been too quick, he thought bitterly. The concussion of returning space-distortion had scarcely echoed away before arms had locked round him and a needle slid into his arm. He wondered how long he had been unconscious; certainly he had no memory of being placed in the chair.

He opened his eyes again. There now seemed to be two Marsh Wallaces in the room: one, the real Wallace, was still unconscious in the complex chair. The second lifted off his headpiece and rose briskly.

"Universal network news will kill this story!" he stated crisply. "I'll see to it!"

The large man began to withdraw the probes which Nick assumed had drained thought patterns from the unconscious man's mind. "What do you plan?" he asked.

Marsh Wallace's characteristic short laugh sounded in the room. "It won't be difficult! When you're gone I shall be alone here—on the spot, and can issue an authoritative announcement that it is merely an unusual atmospheric phenomenon."

Nick shivered, and felt that his blood was stirring and his tongue less like wood in his mouth. He wondered how long it took these agents of a superior world to learn how to mould their features by conscious will.

"Why don't you—leave us alone," he whispered hoarsely.

They all looked at him and brows fully as thick and bushy as Marsh Wallace's rose expressively.

"Would *you* leave a threat from an inferior life-form unchecked?" he demanded coolly.

NICK KNEW that the question could receive only one answer. Time was, when men had been the superior, and he thought of the use men had made of that superiority. Mankind had made himself master by slaying or overriding every other living thing. Now that was changed—man suddenly found himself lower down on the evolutionary scale, and did not like it. It was nice to be top-dog, he thought; but easier to see the other viewpoint when one became under-dog....

"If you go outside the dome you'll be arrested," he protested. "You can't touch the project rocket."

The man who looked like Marsh Wallace considered him gravely. "It would be a sound plan for a second Riordan to accompany me," he said, and his eyes went to the chair where his prototype still sat, white and unmoving. "We could find another volunteer willing to stay behind—as him?"

They nodded.

"Good. Alf Somers is officially dead. Sam Cordy can disappear. A second Nick Riordan and myself can remain here to clear things up."

Nick felt cold dismay run through him. They planned to leave a new Riordan, who would speak, act and move as he did—who would be admitted to the *Project 13* site without question. Whose very fingerprints would undoubtedly be his, by some imitative process these beings understood and controlled! The new Riordan would speak with his lips, framing thoughts as he would express them, and no one would ever know....

"We must not forget Judge Henson and his daughter," the large man pointed out, swinging away the headpiece from over Wallace's head.

The new Marsh Wallace nodded. "I can see to that. A bathing accident can be reported. With strong tides bodies are easily lost, and both were frequent swimmers."

They took the inert form from the complicated chair and lifted Nick into it. He tried to struggle but his limbs were heavy and did not respond to his will, and bands were fixed round his legs and arms. His head was dragged back into the curved rest and a retaining semicircle of resilent steel drawn tightly round his forehead. A dark bandage was placed over his eyes.

"Mankind's way of dealing with oppositlon has often been quite ruthless," Marsh Wallace's voice pointed out. "You should feel no anger if we klll you."

There were sounds of preparation round Nick in the unseen room. A vivid fear burned in the center of his mind, radiating outwards in a circle of apprehension.

"Can't you—leave Earth alone?" he pleaded, his voice sounding unnatural even in his own ears.

Wallace's short laugh came without humour. "Mere distance through ordinary space is no safeguard for us. Second-stage space is different—a fact you and the others working on *Project 13* have practlcally guessed. We don't wish to be subject to the old troubles, or exposed to the old contagion. The people of your millennium have played their part, and it has been as important to us as the ape was to man. No one can reach the high stages without ascending from the lower. Higher life-forms may supplant the lower, but they could not arise if those from which they had sprung had never existed. We have no enmity for you, just as you probably have none for the ape. Nevertheless, you would not permit savages to tear down the civilization you have so laboriously constructed. You would realise that your worth exceeded theirs. Similarly we, with our mental and physical stamina perfected by many millennia of culture and genetical control, know ourselves to be superior to you. Therefore we must safeguard ourselves from you."

A prick made Nick's arm tingle. He tried to speak but could find nothing to say. Time was, he thought, when man had always expected to be great; time was, when men supposed the race would always go on, even though individuals were mortal. Mankind, he had always liked to think, was collectively immortal....

"Like other savages, you are often noble, but often irratlonal," the voice murmured. "Often splendid, often great; but often weak, often self-seeking..."

The voice receded as if to a great distance, and Nick's consciousness ceased.

FOR A LONG time in a deep, central recess of his mind the knowledge of being continued to exist, though isolated from every sense. Feeling had ceased, as had all sense of passing time. Within remained the single spark of living mind, oppressed by strange fears and inarticulate dreads and expectatlons, as a questing came through his brain, as if his memories and thoughts were being taken as a model. A murmuring began and contlnued intermittently—how long, he could not tell. He did not realise that he still sat unmoving in the complex chair with its intricate apparatus low over his head. He did not know when the headpiece was slowly raised by its lifting mechanism, and a replica of himself rose a trifle stiffly from the second chair, looking down at him, and smiling with his own slightly crooked smile.

"Time still is, when a man can

make sacrifices for his fellows..." the replica murmured, and went out. The others went with him, talking. Then with the second Marsh Wallace at his side the new Riordan went into Alf Somers' laboratory workshop. The door closed behind them.

Nick did not feel himself being lifted from the complex chair, or carried out into a small craft that had come down from the circular ship. He did not see the military massing on the hill, or realise that they could see no ship as they looked down across the slopes. He did not feel the acceleration of the circular ship. Nor did he hear the murmur that drifted all along the hills as the golden dome suddenly ceased to exist and two figures, immediately recognizeable by many of the watching thousands as Marsh Wallace and Nick Riordan, came walking out from behind the house, going up the slopes towards the high-ranking official who stepped forward, not without hesitation, to meet them.

His mind turned slowly like a sluggish wheel about an axis, and did not register the miracles of advanced technique with which the circular vessel was fitted. A thought grew, dimly at first. Somehow the race of mankind must survive. A species could not build so near the stars...then perish. Though individuals died, the race must continue. That alone gave purpose to living, and lifted individuals above futility.

NICK AWOKE slowly as if from a deep and relaxing sleep. Isolated phrases that had been incomprehensible when taken alone began to join up in his mind, developing new meaning. His level of mankind was essential, they had said, because the lower stages in any evolutionary process were essential to the attainment of the higher.

Feeling returned to his limbs, and he lifted himself slowly. He had lain upon a green couch, with a pillow of similar spongy material under his head. The room was as clean and fresh as the inside of a polished plastic cube and only a faint humming showed he was in a vessel. The window was flush, apparently a transparency fused into the wall, and the light coming from the ceiling shone from no visible source. He got up and looked through the window, feeling momentarily forgotten by wonderment at what he saw.

Far below was the Earth. Midday sun made white the clouds, and shone on the towns and hills seen between them, picking out the roads like long loops of tape. Pointing up like a silver finger was *Project 13*, reflections glancing off her near side like white, living fire.

"Man is a great building animal," a smooth voice said quietly.

Nick turned from the window, startled, and wondered if the man before him had been Judge Henson. If so, the resemblance had gone, as had the dark clothing. The newcomer wore a light, sparkling garment of plastic and his face was brown, lean, and noble. The eyes were kindly yet cautious, stern yet pleasant.

"Without his building ability, man would be nothing," he added, coming to the window. "Man is what he has made himself. Other creatures are merely what they have become. That is the essential difference, and why man is the greatest, noblest and finest of creatures."

"And *Project 13?*" Nick asked, looking far below at the silver spear.

"She will never fly. It has been arranged."

Nick sighed. He had always felt the project rocket a great attainment, in every way symbolic of man's expansion. The other followed his gaze and nodded.

"One dare not leave half-understood power in a child's hands. For you, a few thousand years of progress have

passed. Think, then, what men can become in the fullness of all futurity."

"There was something—odd in her drive," Nick said, suddenly understanding.

"Exactly." Keen eyes met his, then returned to the window. "In second-order space there is no time; there can be none, since no sequence of events exists there. But you will leave your own system and colonise planets near other stars—when the right moment comes. That time is not yet."

The window blinked dark. Nick looked out, but the Earth had gone. No sun shone across the heavens; no stars burned distantly above. Instead was only empty blackness, surrounddtions. If they wanted George they'd void, and lacking any distinguishing feature.

"Here, there are no incidents to run concurrently, and consequently no time," his companion pointed out as if feeling an explanation was necessary.

VOICES came outside the door, and Judge Henson, with Niora holding his arm. Nick quivered as from a shock, his eyes searching their startled faces, then a great relief came. *It was all right.* This *was* Niora. Her clear golden eyes lit up eagerly, and she ran from her father, who was breathing heavily from walking.

She clung to Nick. "Nick! Oh, I was afraid I'd be *alone!*"

Two voices were arguing outside the door. Sam Cordy came in, his eyes twinkling and a grin on his round face. Nick's gaze flickered past him. The other man *was* Marsh Wallace.

Light blinked on in the window and they looked through. An unfamiliar sun burned in an unknown heaven, and below was a planet very like Earth.

"Behind us exist almost uncountable milennia of tecnical knowledge and advancement in every branch of science and attainment," the man in sparkling plastic said.

Nick felt momentary doubt. "But Alf's death?"

"An accident. He killed himself trying to escape. We could not explain, then. We dared not. We naturally regretted it." The other paused. "Time, like space, is not concurrent when the distances are vast and made through different orders of space. Back there, your little corner of the cosmos is experiencing time in our past."

The strange sun shone on a splendid heritage built by men who had indeed reached the stars, Nick thought. Mankind's past was now far away. Time was, when man had struggled and won his way through to this. The cities below were not alien—only futuristic. He looked into the eyes of those who had gathered around him and lived because *his* mankind had reached the stars, and felt proud. It had been worthwhile. The future men were right *Project* 13 must never stumble across space and through millennia of time to this, man's most splendid heritage, once again introducing barbaric customs, greed, self-seeking trade, disease, and every seed of disaster. The first ship had come, in its due time, but had not been *Project 13.*

"You are descended from the old people of Earth," he said. "From the people of my day, through their sons, who first came out to new systems."

"Of course."

High, noble buildings glowed under the sun. Slender vehicles sped along busy streets and wide bridges that spanned from block to block. Far beyond the city boundary a spaceship glinted in a long arc, taking off for the heavens. Nick nodded to himself. This was what he had always dreamed of, for man.

● END



IN-GROUP

by L. Sprague de Camp

N-no, Bertin could not make Moyang a better offer for the records than their value as raw gold. Well, then, what was Bertin beefing about?

ALI MOYANG was leading his party, gun ready, when he saw the bundle of clothes lying on the trail ahead. He held up a hand in warning and trotted forward until he stood over the bundle.

The bundle resolved itself into a man lying unconscious but still breathing in a rattling and irregular way. The man was nearly a head taller than Ali Moyang's stocky frame. He was unarmed, though a small canvas knapsack lay beside him, and obviously of the White race, with a lobster-red skin, graying red hair, a close-cut red mustache, and a stubble of red whiskers covering his large red face. He bore the sagging look of a man who had been on the fat side but who had worked most of the fat off in a

crucial struggle that had left him exhausted almost to death.

Ali thought, the fellow couldn't have been there long or he would have been stepped on by an uyedna or eaten by a ftom or otherwise maltreated by the unfriendly fauna of the planet Kterem, or as the astronomers prefer to call it, 61 Cygni A VI.

The treasure-hunter shook the recumbent man by the shoulder until the big body rolled over onto its back. Then Moyang unscrewed his canteen and dribbled a little water into the half-open mouth. The red man coughed, sputtered, and opened bleary blue eyes.

"*Qui etes...*" he croaked, then changed to Anglo-Terran: "Who are you?"

Moyang's slanting black eyes narrowed still further. "Suppose you tell me who you are first."

"My name is Bertin. Charles Bertin."

"What?" Moyang could not quite catch the man's mumble.

"Professor Charles Bertin. Does that satisfy you?"

"How did you get here?"

"My—'copter crashed. May I have some more water?"

Moyang extended the canteen, asking: "What were you doing flying around the Jiltak region? You know you're stuck if you're forced down."

"I was—looking over the site of Zhovacim."

At the sound of the name of the ruined city, Moyang's hand jerked so that he splashed a little of the water into Bertin's face. Behind him on the trail, his partners Ma and Peterson exchanged glances, while the four baggage-bearing Kteremians showed no legible expression on their unhuman faces.

"What were you going to do there?" said Kisari.

"Scientific work."

"What kind?"

"Archeological stuff. You know, digging."

"Unh," said Moyang, staring at Bertin in honest perplexity. While he did not wish to leave the fellow to die on the trail, to have some scientific crackpot horning in on his, Moyang's, enterprise at this stage was about the most inconvenient thing that could have happened. He persisted:

"Why were you flying, then? You can't dig from the air."

"That was to come later. This was a preliminary recon, to make sure there were no—unfriendly people or things hiding in the ruins before going in on foot."

The water was loosening Bertin's dessiccated vocal organs so that the words came faster and more clearly with each sentence.

"Were there any?" asked Moyang.

"No. Not that I saw at least."

"Where are you based?"

Bertin began heaving himself to his feet, joint by joint. As Moyang caught the big man's elbow to help him up, Bertin answered the last question:

"Hadal."

"Oh!" said Moyang. "You're friendly with the Fshi?"

BERTIN gave an expressive shrug, his hands, shoulders, and eyebrows all rising at once. "As friendly as one can get with another species. I was headed back towards Hadal when I collapsed. And thank you many times for saving my life. If I can help you in any way..."

"I think you can," said Moyang.

"Ah?"

"Yes. Get us into Hadal. You know, introduce us to the chief with a good recommendation."

"Very well. Would it be too much to ask what you are after?"

As he spoke, Bertin picked up his knapsack. The augmented party began to move along the trail again, slowly because Bertin tottered rather than walked.

Moyang looked slantwise at his rescuee. "You'll learn."

"Well, at least tell me who you are.

I should be able to call you something better than 'Hey you!' "

"I don't mind. I'm Ali Moyang, and these are my partners, Ma Shuan-di and Silas Peterson."

As Bertin ducked his large head in acknowledgment, Moyang continued: "Haven't you got a gun?"

"Yes, but I forgot it."

"*Forgot* it?"

"Yes, I am ashamed to say. I was so excited about seeing Zhovacim for the first time that I forgot to load it into my machine."

Peterson snickered and said: "Dope."

Bertin continued in a defensive tone: "Anyway I did not expect to crash. It was one of those *tsestni*."

He gave the native name for one of the small but violent whirlwinds, like miniature tornadoes, which the climatic conditions of the planet engendered. Then he looked sharply at Moyang, observing the stocky, well-knit frame, the flat yellow-brown face, the coarse straight black hair.

"Malayan or Indonesian?" he said.

Moyang nodded curtly, though his feeling towards Bertin was not unfriendly. The fact of having saved the man's life had built a bond of sorts between them. And while the fellow seemed somewhat of a fool like all these brainy persons, his manner was pleasant enough in a naive way. But Ali Moyang was conditioned by experience in chancy enterprises like this one not to open up to strangers more than was necessary. Moyang only hoped that when and if the professor learned of his objective he would not make things difficult.

THE LONG Kteremian day was well advanced when Moyang had come upon the fallen Bertin. So when, after another two slow kilometers, Ma, sweating heavily, pointed out a good camping-place, Moyang did not object to stopping.

Moyang took a package from one of the Kteremians, opened it, and extracted a Cohen tent, no bigger than a book when folded, but soon erected into a structure big enough to hold all four earthmen. He set the transparency-control to full, so that the tent was a mere filmy shimmer veiling its spidery guy-wires, and from another pouch brought out a pocket-sized atomic air-conditioner which he attached to a loop that hung down from the peak. When the little machine began to hum, a delicious coolness made itself felt in the tent.

As the Kteremian helpers prepared the meal and handed it around, Bertin said: "I cannot contribute because I had eaten all my emergency rations —but now that I think, there is something..."

The big man fumbled in his knapsack and brought out an ornate half-liter bottle.

"Brandy, by God!" cried Peterson. "It was a lucky day we found you, Mr. Bertin."

Bertin passed the bottle around. When his turn came, Moyang looked suspiciously at the cognac bottle. Drinking had never been among his vices. But then he was tired too, and might as well defer to the spirit of the occasion this once. They all had something to celebrate: Bertin for having had his life saved; the treasure-hunters for having found a man who could give them entree to the village of the little-known Fshi. He drank.

With tongues loosened a discussion arose: that old campfire standby about the best means of transportation for exploring the surface of Kterem. Bertin was a flying enthusiast. Peterson objected that the tsestni made it too hazardous; that mules were the logical answer. Moyang complained that mules could not live on the native vegetation, but sickened and died if they tried, and that therefore so much of their load had to be devoted to fodder that they had no capacity left for payload. Therefore one's own two feet, while slow and laborious, were the one sure means of locomotion.

Ma, who spoke little, mildly suggested that somebody ought to do something about taming and breeding some suitable native species....

When the brandy was gone, Moyang leaned back with a benign expression on his usually impassive face. He felt so benign, in fact, that when Bertin again asked him what he was after, he lazily replied:

"Oh, I suppose you'll learn sooner or later. We're after the treasure of Zhovacim."

"But—" said Bertin sharply, then fell silent, chewing the ends of his mustache.

"Yes?" said Moyang.

"What does this treasure consist of?"

"As I got the story from old Mendelius before he died, there are about a million sheets of gold inscribed with the records of the old kingdom of Zhovac, just waiting for somebody to take them. What do you know about it?"

Bertin nodded. "I talked to Mendelius too, and I have seen one of the sheets, in the chief's hut in Hadal."

"Do the Fshi go up there?"

"No, they are afraid to."

"Some tribal superstition?"

"Yes. But Mendelius brought this one sheet down and left it because he was too old to carry the extra weight."

"Are they heavy?" asked Moyang.

"Surprisingly so. What are you planning to do with these sheets?"

"Turn them into bullion."

Bertin paled under his redness and said in a strained voice: "There is a law about antiquities."

"Oh, that. When a mass of gold is melted up you can't tell what it was originally, and a cut will take care of nosey officials."

"Those sheets are of enormous scientific value, and you would melt them up for some lousy gold?"

"What do you mean, lousy gold? It's still money on this planet."

"You cannot take it back to Terra; the freight would eat up most of the value, and all gold is controlled there—"

"Who said anything about going back to Terra? I've got two wives and six children to support in Sveho, right here on Kterem."

MOYANG scowled at the professor, his benignity evaporating. The man was going to be difficult after all. Ali Moyang had come across this type before: people who were solemnly fanatical about some abstract idea like law or history or science, subjects about which he knew little and cared less.

Bertin persisted: "But the scientific importance—"

"What's that worth on the open market? Can you get me a better offer for these sheets than I could get for them as raw gold?"

"N-no; there is no appropriation I can think of..."

"Well then?"

"But," said Bertin, "you will never be able to carry this through."

"Why not?"

"You cannot work through the summer, which will soon be upon us; and by next autumn Zhovacim will have been declared a protected site."

"Why can't I work through the dry season?" Moyang felt a rising urge to tell this oversized fathead off. Europeans always thought they knew it all.

"Because in the Jiltak region the temperature goes up almost to the boiling-point of water during the day. And you cannot estivate like the Kteremians. I was going to pull out in a few days myself."

Moyang pointed to his little air-conditioner, humming away above their heads. "We'll spend our days asleep in our tent and work at night by searchlights. By the time your bureaucrats get around to putting Zhovacim on the reserved list, we'll have gone over the place like a vacuum-cleaner."

Bertin said: "Look, Moyang. Can-

not I make you understand the importance—"

"Importance of what? What's so remarkable about a lot of sheets of gold with ancient scratches on them?"

"They have—or so I hope—the whole history of the kingdom of Zhovac, for a thousand Kteremian years! Pre-Hrata history! Since Alphonse Klein deciphered the Hrata Pictographic script a few years ago we can read a good part of the Zhovac writing, from which the Hrata Pictographic evolved."

"Who cares? If you like history, there is more Terran history alone, not to mention the other civilized planets, than anybody could read in a lifetime."

"But damn it, this is knowledge! If those sheets are melted—"

Moyang's voice rose also. "You educated people make me tired. None of you ever does an honest day's work." (To tell the truth Ali Moyang never did either, but he did not see fit to mention that fact.) "I don't mind your fooling around with your history and science and all those fool games, but when you interfere with a man who's trying to make a more or less honest living—"

BERTIN'S big red fists clenched. "Before I let some ignorant *grippe-sou* destroy those relics, I would—"

"You'd what?" said Moyang in a softly dangerous voice.

Bertin mastered his emotions. "Never mind. Let us talk of something more pleasant."

"Oh, sure. How about these Fshi?"

"What about them?"

"I've heard various rumors: that they're harmless and friendly, or that they're dangerous and treacherous. Which is right?"

Bertin shrugged. "As Kteremian primitives go, they are not bad fellows. It depends on how you stand with them."

"How do you mean?"

"Whether, that is, you acquire the status of a member of the in-group."

"The what?"

Moyang began to fear that he was in for a lecture. That was the trouble with people like Bertin. Ask a simple question and you get a string of technical terms no plain man can understand.

The red man's manner subtly acquired a professorial tinge. "In anthropology and anthropoidology we recognize the concept of the in-group and the out-group. A Fshi does not divide the animal kingdom into Kteremians, other native vertebrates, human beings, and so on. Or rather he does, but only in a rudimentary way. The important distinction for them is between a Fshi, which means a member of the in-group, 'one of us', and a *tuzatsha,* which means any animal—any active organism—that is not a Fshi, including Terrans and members of other Kteremian tribes. And while the Fshi are quite upright and altruistic towards other Fshi, they regard all tuzatsha as more or less fair game."

"Then why haven't they speared and eaten you?" asked Peterson.

"Oh, they are not anthropophagous, nor are they actively hostile to all tuzatsha—only to those whom they fear, such as the carnivorous ftomi, or their enemies the Zraci. I was describing their mental attitude. You will not have any serious difficulty with them, though right now they are a little noisy and boisterous."

"Why are they?" asked Moyang.

"They are preparing for their mating season." Bertin yawned. "Do you mind if I sleep now? I have just had one of the worst days of my life."

When Bertin was snoring, Moyang assigned watches to Peterson and Ma, saying: "Watch that he doesn't get his hands on a gun."

"Yeah," said Peterson. "You can't trust these fanatics." And the silent Ma nodded.

HADAL was like other Kteremian villages except that, being too far from the Terran center of Sveho, it had not been touched by the exotic cultural radiation from that city and therefore was not contaminated by television aerials projecting from the roofs of the huts, rusty automobiles parked beside them, and Kteremians wearing grotesque imitations of earthly clothing over their feathery pelts. Sounds of iron-working came from the smithy, and a pervasive smell of garbage and other substances from everywhere. The village seemed unduly crowded for its size with Fshi having flowers and other ornaments bound to their heads, necks, and limbs.

The chief of Hadal, whom Bertin introduced as Vitse2, came out to meet them with an honor-guard of spearmen and crossbowmen. Moyang noted Bertin's fluency in the use of the Fshi language. Its only imperfection was that the whistles (represented in transcription by numerals) were not so sharp and distinct as in the speech of native Kteremians, but Bertin was hardly to be blamed since he was not equipped with the great pink Kteremian incisor teeth to whistle through.

Nevertheless Moyang, who had always gotten along well enough with trade-pidgin and a smattering of the language-gronp of which Fshi was a dialect, did not admire Bertin for his linguistic skill. It was the sort of accomplishment for which he had no use.

The fields around the village provided a break in the everlasting forest. A group of Fshi were going over one of these fields with rakes and a roller to smooth it off. Over the tops of the trees Moyang could see the mountain peak of Spatril. Two-thirds of the way up its slope a slight discoloration turned ont through his binoculars to be the ruins of Zhovacim.

Moyang felt his pulse rising with eagerness to be off and up. He could already imagine the jewels and gorgeous raiment with which he would deck his wives with the proceeds from his loot, for he was generous in family matters.

Protocol being satisfied, the honor-guard broke ranks and with the rest of the tribe crowded around the newcomers to finger their equipment with their talons in a guilelessly exasperating manner and to make speculative comments on the pysiology and probable habits of the Terrans. Moyang, knowing better than to show impatience or resentment, stood the inspection until the Fshi wandered off about their own affairs. Then, in his own broken Fshi, Moyang asked the chief where he might pitch his tent.

Vitse2 designated a level spot and departed also. As the tent went up, Moyang remarked:

"Are they always dressed up like this?"

"No," replied Bertin. "They have gathered from the outlying huts for tonight's mating-dance. That is why they are decorated."

"How long does this go on? I don't want to be kept awake all night."

"I fear you will be. They dance continuously until the mating tomorrow at noon. It is quite a spectacular ceremony."

"If you're interested. Which do you think would be the better plan: to camp here and hike up the mountain every day to work, or to camp on the mountain?"

"Oh, you must certainly camp here. There is no water on Spatril and you would have to haul it up every day."

Moyang asked: "What's the difference, whether we climb down the mountain every day and up again, or up and then down?"

"If you haul the water up you are fighting gravity, whereas if you haul your loot down, gravity will be helping you."

MOYANG rubbed his nearly beardless chin thoughtfully. "Still, all

that gold would be pretty heavy."

Bertin winced. "No heavier than the water you would have to haul up. It is unbelievable, the way you evaporate water during summer in this region."

"Why couldn't we send the helpers down for the water?"

"Because they will soon estivate." Bertin swept a hand to indicate the surrounding jungle. "You can hardly believe the change that will take place in a few days. All these trees will be so many dry sticks, without a leaf anywhere. The Fshi will have erected a thorn-bush barricade around Hadal and gone to sleep. Then with the coming of the first rain of autumn they will awaken, and the females will give birth... Are you sure you will not change your mind about this mad scheme?"

"Not a chance."

The noise was even worse than Moyang had expected, all night, and he came out of the tent into the following dawn in a surly mood. The beflowered Fshi were still prancing around the field that they had levelled for the purpose. To one side of this field a number of domestic animals had been tethered. Bertin, red-eyed from lack of sleep, was still squatting on the sidelines and taking motion pictures.

"Come along," growled Moyang.

"Come along where?" said Bertin.

"We're starting up the mountain right after breakfast."

"Go ahead."

"You're coming with us."

"Not today," said Bertin. "Not until the mating-dance is over, and then I shall be too tired for climbing."

"I said you were coming," said Moyang. "Don't make us get rough."

"What is the matter with you? I am not bothering you. Go on up your mountain."

"And leave you here to sabotage our equipment, or stir the villagers against us? No sir! I want you where I can keep an eye on you."

"Well, you would have to carry me. I am much too exhausted from my recent experience to climb mountains."

"Damn it, maybe this will change your mind!" Moyang unhooked his gun from his belt and unfolded the stock with a click.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" said Bertin. "Go ahead, shoot!"

Moyang's finger touched the trigger. Then he lowered the gun.

"You crazy fanatic," he said. "You know I don't want to kill you. I'm not a murderer, just an honest treasure-hunter."

"Then what is all the fuss about? All I ask is to be let alone today to watch this ceremony. You would find it interesting too if you would take your mind off gold for a minute."

"Me? Not likely."

"Anyway, you and your companions need a rest just as I do. If you are staying here all summer you will have plenty of time to raid the ruins. One day's delay will not hurt you."

Moyang said: "Will you give me your word to come with us tomorrow without argument?"

"Surely, surely."

"All right. We'll leave an hour before dawn, so as to get to Zhovacim before the heat of the day."

"A sound idea. Now watch the dance."

Moyang said: "I'd rather rustle some breakfast."

"Oh, but they are working up to the climax. This is something tourists travel light-years to see."

MOYANG hesitated, watching the lines of Kteremians weaving back and forth. As he stood watching, intrigued in spite of himself, Ma and Peterson came out of the tent. The latter remarked:

"Those Joes can sure dent a board."

"What?" said Bertin.

Peterson repeated his remark, more loudly to penetrate the din, and did a little dance-step of his own to illustrate his meaning.

Moyang asked: "Why are all those animals tied up?"

"They are for the blood," said Bertin.

"What blood?"

"Why, although they are normally vegetarians, the male Kteremians require a drink of blood in order to be fertile."

"That so?" said Peterson. "It gives me a idea."

"Or at least so they believe. Nobody knows if it is true or a mere superstition."

A couple of Kteremians had left the dance and were doing things with the beasts. They had set out a big deep bowl, and a couple of them now hauled one animal, a *svlek*, up to the bowl and pulled its head out across the vessel. Another Fshi, whom Moyang recognized by his ornaments as Vitse2 (the treasure-hunter otherwise found it almost impossible to tell the natives apart) cut the creature's throat with a copper knife so that the blood streamed into the bowl.

A retching noise beside him made Moyang turn. Ma, squeamish in such matters, was having trouble with his stomach. Moyang turned back to watch the spectacle. As the second beast was hauled forward, Moyang suddenly felt the powerful grip of Kteremian hands upon his arms.

He had been seized from behind by two Fshi. Even before he turned his head an outcry from his two companions told him that they had likewise been taken. Bertin and the helpers were also under constraint.

"Bertin!" yelled Moyang. "What's this?"

The red man calmly replied: "They are going to cut our throats as with the other beasts."

"What? Why? Do something! Talk to Vitse2!"

"You cannot talk to a Kteremian in rut."

"But what's the idea? They seemed friendly!"

"They are when not worked up by the ceremony. Now they regard us as tuzatsha and have no compunction about killing us."

A HORRIBLE suspicion entered Moyang's mind. "Did you know this was going to happen?"

Bertin nodded.

"You mean you deliberately trapped us?"

"I had to."

"After we saved your life?"

Bertin gave one of those colossal shrugs, as well as he could with his arms pinioned. "I am sorry, but it was either that or letting you destroy the historical records of Zhovacim. I tried to talk you out of that vandalism, but you were determined."

The animals had now all been killed and one of the native helpers was hauled towards the bowl. Moyang screamed:

"You mean you're willing not only to have us killed but yourself as well? You lunatic! I should have shot you just now—"

Bertin smiled a melancholy little smile. "We should all be dead in another hundred years anyway, while knowledge goes on forever."

The first native helper's throat had now been cut and a second was on his way to the bowl. A knot of Fshi standing by the bowl seemed to be involved in some dispute. Finally the whole group turned and walked towards the victims, Viste2 in the lead. The chief spoke in rumbling Fshi to Bertin, whose arms were released.

"What are they letting you go for?" shouted Moyang.

"They had a little dispute. The upshot was that they decided that because I spoke Fshi so well I must have the soul of a Fshi, and therefore I should be counted as a member of the in-group."

"But how about us?"

"Unfortunately you speak with what they consider a Znaci accent, and the Znaci, as their hereditary enemies, are

(*please turn to page* 116)

SHE KNEW THE FACE OF EVIL
(*cont'd from page 25*)

Beside her, Jan instantly awakened. She clutched him. On the couch Dick awakened with a yell.

Like a cold wind from outer space, the alien life-form flowed into the room.

She sensed rather than heard Dick grab the generator from the coffee table. She did not hear him move, did not know that he had lifted the generator and brought it into action.

The night was filled with a sudden scream, the wail of the thing!

Then the night was lit with a brilliance as furious as the radiance from a flaming sun. It was not a light that carried warmth with it, she was not sure that it reached her mind through the medium of her eyes.

All she knew was that the room seemed to explode with light. She had the impression of bits of moisture showering over her, like a sudden flurry of misty raindrops coming out of nothingness. Then the darkness fell again. Jan hastily turned on the light.

It had happened in the length of time between awakening and turning on the light.

The walls of the room were wet, the sheets were damp. But there was nothing in the room except what belonged there.

"It's gone," Sylvia whispered. "It's finished. It's done."

Across the room, Dick Carson clutched his generator, his eyes frantically searching for a target.

There was no target.

The three of them huddled together until the dawn. Slowly, softly, gently, light came. Outside in the trees birds began to sing. Utterly oblivious of the forces of the night, a robin whooped its spring song in greeting to the new day....

IN THE FAR depths of space, the creature once known as Melancius roams no more, seeking new feeding grounds on far planets....

In the big lecture hall of the university, Prof. Alex Thompson, forgetful that he had delivered this lecture once before, picked up on a favorite subject. "An atom explodes inside the sun, an event taking place ninety-three million miles from us. Springing out from this tiny explosion is a radiation which we call like and to which we respond by seeing..... The question is— To what other events, taking place at unimaginable distances from us, are we also responding?"

Reaching this point, he paused and smiled benevolently over his audience. It was as if somehow or other he was expecting an answer to this question.

Jan caught Sylvia thinking, "If he only knew a hundredth part of what goes on in the room around him—"

He caught traces of her amusement and joined it.

Two Branni, watchers of the night, wardens of vast spaces, amusing each other.

IN-GROUP (*cont'd from page 115*)

naturally members of the out-group."

"Did you know they were going to turn you loose, you treacherous devil?"

"No. Or rather I thought there was about a fifty-fifty chance that they would do so. It seemed a chance worth taking."

The supply of native helpers being exhausted, Ma was dragged off protesting in a shrill singsong. Moyang said:

"Look, Bertin, get us out of this and I'll go away and never look at your damned city again..."

Another shrug. "I am sorry, but I could not even if I wished."

Shouting hysterical curses, Moyang was dragged to the bowl. A taloned hand reached across from the far side of the vessel, grasped his hair, and pulled his head, face down, out over the pool of blood that had already been collected. The last thing that Ali Moyang saw was the staring and disheveled reflection of his own face in the scarlet surface.

ASYLUM

by WILLIAM MORRISON

MACKLIN was exhausted. For one hopeless moment he had a feeling that he'd never be able to make it back home, but he knew that if he didn't succeed this time he'd be finished for good, and the thought frightened him enough to give him strength. He had to get back just this once, and he'd be all right. Dr. Preising had said so, and Dr. Preising was the one man he could trust.

The crowds were worse than ever. But as he pushed his way into the flight station, their very oppressiveness stimulated his antagonism, and aroused his own will to fight. The first elbow in his ribs brought an instant reaction. For every push or blow he received he gave back two, and he grunted with satisfaction as he felt the people around him wince. On the whole, the business of getting into the flight train was rather satisfying, even though he didn't find a seat. It bolstered his ego considerably. But after the reaction had passed, it left him more exhausted than ever.

When he got home, he sank into a form-fitting seat and had just strength enough to press the necessary buttons before he let himself go. Then he closed his eyes and sighed with pleasure. Currents of warm air whirled and swirled over his body, with the soothing effect of a languorous warm bath, easing his tense muscles, giving him the sense of care and comfort he had so badly missed during the day. After a while he had recovered enough energy to be able to stand listening to music. Another button brought him the Soothing Senses program.

Precisely on the hour, a pleasant metallic volce said, "Message, sir. Your automatic transcribed message. Received 4:37."

"Read it," he said wearily.

"Dear George," read the voice. "Just got in from Mars. Hope to see you before I take off again. Don't think I'll go back there though. That place is getting to be as bad as Earth. I'll have to find some new planet. Regards to Charlotte and say hello to your neurosis for me. Pete."

"Say hello to your neurosis—" he felt a sudden surge of anger. By Pluto, that stupid brother of his thought that he was making up his ailments because he liked to be sick. What a fool he was. Always had been. Ruined his own life with his crazy ideas, and now he was trying to ruin every one else's.

The metallic announcer cut In again on his thoughts. "Message, sir. Direct, not automatic."

"Pass it."

This time it was his wife's voice. "George, darling, I haven't the strength to come home. I'm being analyzed at the beauty parlor. You don't mind, do you?"

Of course he didn't mind. The idea

Naturally, with his particular range of conflicts, Macklin needed only a Class D analyst. That was only logical



that he cared what happened to her was merely one of her silly romantic notions, one that she would have got rid of long ago if her Dr. Gaffner were one half as efficient as he pretended to be.

He sensed warm fur under his hand as it lay over the arm of his chair. "Hello, Daisy," he said, a touch of affection coming into his voice. "Good old Daisy." He felt a rough tongue lick his hand, and then the dog subsided into inactivity.

For a while he dozed, not unhappily. Then, on the half hour, the announcer spoke again. "Dr. Preising, sir. Private channel."

"Ready," said Macklin.

THE SCANNER and the visor came at once. He and Dr. Preising were face to face. "Have a good day, Macklin?" asked the analyst.

"As usual, Doctor. No, come to think of it, it was a little worse than usual. Our first floor was being torn up, and that disrupted the entire routine."

"Go ahead and tell me about it. How did you feel?"

"I felt as if I couldn't stand it any more. Today it was the cocktail pipes that had to be fixed. I can do without a cocktail, Doctor, as well as the next man, but I don't like this continual tearing up of things, even though, in a way, it does satisfy my death instinct. But it seems that every day during the past month there's been something."

"Every day?" There was just the hint of a humorous question mark in Dr. Preising's tone, cajoling and soothing at the same time.

"It seems that way. The heat beam, the working power beam, the communications beam, the food flow pipes—everything has been going wrong. I suppose it isn't so much, when you consider the enormous amount of apparatus that has to be kept in order for the sake of an entire city, but it's getting so that when something goes wrong on the second floor, we feel it way up on the fifty-fifth. There's not a section of the building, or for that matter of the street, that isn't continually undergoing repairs."

"Yes, yes, go on."

"Sometimes I think that life *is* too complicated. Last week, the helicopter feeder service was interrupted for five minutes, and you should have seen the confusion that caused. And two weeks ago, when the plane flight schedule was messed up—"

"I know. I suffered from it myself."

"Our lives are entangled in a million different threads. And when something goes wrong with one of those threads, we suffer."

Dr. Preising smiled. "True, true enough."

"You're laughing at me. You're thinking that it isn't a very original reflection."

"I'm not laughing at all. I was merely smiling, very ruefully. I can't help thinking how right you are."

"Sometimes I feel as if I'd like to cut all the threads and just tear myself loose—oh, I know that isn't possible, Doctor, no man can live outside society, but anyway, that's how I feel."

"It is good to recognize and to admit your own feelings."

"Even though it only makes me more unhappy to be forced to admit that they're silly?"

"Yes, even though you must do that."

"Well, perhaps you're right." Once more he felt the soft fur under his hand. "Oh, by the way, Doctor. Can you see the dog at my side? That's Daisy, and I'm very fond of her. And I suppose the complexities of life have got her too. She's been very unhappy lately. And I've been wondering—"

"I understand. You yourself would feel better if your dog felt better. I can very well comprehend that. I have a cat myself, and she suffered in much the same way. However, as you

must realize, I personally do not treat animals."

"Oh, I didn't think that at all. I just wanted to know whether or not you could recommend someone good."

"For a dog? I'm not so sure. Dr. Harker treated my cat, but of course dogs and cats are quite different. He must certainly know a good dog man, however. I'll get him to recommend someone."

"Isn't there a directory of analysts?"

"Why, of course. How thoughtless of me to forget. Pardon me for a moment, while I get directory service."

DR. PREISING is really very considerate, thought Macklin. Absent-minded, but considerate. The most considerate analyst I've ever had, and I've had plenty. But the strain's telling on him. You can see it on his face, poor chap.

A moment later, Dr. Preising said, "It's Dr. Krem. Channel 784539."

"Thanks, Doctor," said Macklin gratefully. "I'll have him see Daisy as soon as I can. I hope he can do something for her."

"I'm sure he can. We've progressed greatly in our treatment of animals. You may know that we've had some trouble at the Zoo lately, what with the endless televising to different sections of the planet, and the strain's been too much for some of the animals. The Martian animals, particularly. But we know how to handle them now, and they've recovered."

"That's good. Incidentally, Doctor, I hope you don't mind my getting a bit personal. But it seems to me that you yourself are under a little more tension than usual. How's your own analysis coming along?"

"Come, come, I shouldn't speak of that. This is supposed to be for *your* sake."

"But you've helped me so much, Doctor, I can't help taking an interest. Besides, it would do me good to know that you were getting along well."

"Well, I'm not doing badly. But the feeling that so many patients are dependent upon me does have a depressing effect. And then, of course, all the strains of civilization that have their effect on you also tell on me."

"I suppose they would. However, Doctor, you should have one advantage. I don't want to be crude about it, but *your* analyst—well—"

"You mean that my analyst treats me more skillfully than I treat you? Naturally. For your particular range of conflicts you need only a Class D man. It's an invariable rule, however, that no professional shall be treated except by an analyst of a higher class. I'm under treatment by a Class C man. He's being treated by somebody in Class B, and so on up the line to Class AAA."

"That sounds only logical."

"Logical, but complicated. There are specialist subdivisions for every line of work. And as every trade or profession is dependent upon psychoanalytical assistance at many levels, I suppose that you might say that we have a psychoanalytical society. We have a complicated network of analysts without whom our industries, our agriculture, our communications systems, our space transport—everything, would collapse."

"It must be a tremendous responsibility, Doctor."

"It is, and we feel it. However, that's off the subject. The question is—what do *you* feel?"

"I feel a little better, Doctor. I think it's been good for me to get away from my own troubles for a while and learn something of yours. In fact, I feel *much* better. I must say frankly, Doctor, that without your help life wouldn't be worth living."

"Ah, you're being kind, but you'll realize later that you don't need me as much as you think you do. However, it's good to know that I've been of help. But now, shall we really get down to business? It's been a long time since you've told me anything

about your childhood. Suppose you close your eyes, think of yourself as two years old, and then try free association. Come on, now, anything that comes into your mind. Remember, if you want to be sure that I'm with you, all you have to do is open your eyes and look in the visor."

"All right, Doctor."

MACKLIN closed his eyes. He felt better now. Pete, that fool—He began to remember Pete as a child. Almost the same age they were, Pete just a couple of years younger. Himself as two, Pete just born. Too young. Pete didn't really come into his own until a few years later. And what an unpleasant temperament!

"I can see Pete now," he murmured. "He was an ugly brat, and he knew it. Friends used to come to see us, and my mother would show them his pictures and they knew they were supposed to say something nice and they always found trouble doing it because there was nothing nice to say and they knew that too and my mother knew it as well but she wouldn't admit it my mother was beautiful I thought there was never such a beautiful lady—"

After a time there was the usual warning click on the screen and Dr. Preising said, "That will be all for today, Macklin. See you tomorrow."

And then the visor went dead and Macklin sat up, feeling that he had the energy to face the demands of another day. Whatever would he have done without Dr. Preising?

The automatic announcer seemed to have been waiting for the analysis to end. It gave him the necessary hundred seconds to collect his thoughts, and then it said, "Message, sir. Direct, first remove."

"Pass it."

"George, this is Pete. I've been trying to get you, but your visor's been busy on a private channel. Having your neurosis coddled?" He felt a spasm of anger, but there was nothing he could do about a recorded message. Pete's voice went on, "Anyway, I'm sorry I couldn't get to see you. This place is really a mess. It was impossible to get to your apartment house because of a flight train breakdown and it seems next to impossible to contact you by visor. And Mars is getting to be the same way. That's why I'm not going back.

"I'm seeking asylum on a planet of Tau Centauri. It's a new place that you probably haven't heard of, just opened for colonization. It isn't bad, really. Maybe the very idea of it will make you shudder, but after all, as your own dear brother is going there, you might be interested in knowing what it's like. No particularly dangerous animals or plants, no unhuman enemies. But contact with home is going to be very infrequent, and it seems that we'll lack many of what are known as the blessings of civilization. There'll be one doctor for the colony, an engineer or two, and so on. Very little machinery, at least by comparison, and practically no synthetic food. We'll have to grow our own, at least for a considerable time. I'm going to be head agriculturist, old style. In other words, a farmer.

"And, my dear brother, this is really going to make your hair stand on end. In our entire colony of twenty-five hundred, there's going to be *not one psychoanalyst*. Most of us didn't particularly want one, but when we asked around, mostly for form's sake, we couldn't get any to volunteer to go. They didn't want to leave *their* analysts.

"That'll give you an idea how rugged things are going to be. All the same, I'm looking forward to it. Wish me luck, and I'll be back in twenty-five years to report how I made out."

The fool, thought Macklin, the stupid conceited fool, to go to a place like that and actually to look forward to it. No analysts.

The lunatic!

● END

PRECEDENT

by DANIEL KEYES

THEY SAT at a table in the rear of the saloon—one of the few which allowed androids—and they alternated their depressed stares from Laedo, to the piece of white paper in the center of the table, and back to Laedo again.

He sat studying the red liquor in the glass before him.

Karma, who was drunk, had been staring at his own twisted shoulder. He looked up finally. "Maybe s'better to go first," he said. "Don't have t'wait around without knowing—"

He saw Laedo's frown.

"Well," he said, throwing up his hands, "there y'are. Not a damned thing y'can do. Anyway, glad it's not me. First time ever was glad I was a cripple."

George and Ellen—the other two at the table, both humans—looked at Karma in a way which said that they thought things had come to a pretty pass when someone had to feel like that.

Laedo made two fists of his hands and squeezed them again and again.

It was unpatriotic, they felt, for a robot to become neurotic, just because they were sending him off to war . . .



"If only there was a way out," he said. "To get off the planet. Maybe to Mars or Saturn...." He clicked a thumbnail. "If only I had some money...."

"Darling," said Ellen, "don't get panicky."

"No. I'll just sit here and wait until they come for me."

"She's right you know," offered George, scratching his beard. "It's not going to do you any good to get excited. No good to go running off half-cocked."

"You're *human,*" snapped Laedo. "It's all right for *you* to talk."

"Darling!" Ellen breathed the word sharply.

"But it's true. How can either of you understand the way I feel about it? Or even the way Karma, here, feels? Oh don't look at me with that hurt expression. Even though we may look alike, we *are* different. You and George are humans. First-class citizens, and all the privileges that go with it. We're nothing but robots, with human form and censored human emotions. Freed androids. Second-class citizens of the sovereign Planet of Earth."

"I don't think of you that way," said Ellen.

"Of course not. But that doesn't change things. It doesn't change the fact that I'm android, that the thought of killing makes me sick, that now they want to *adjust* us so they can use us for blasting-fodder in their insane war with Venus. It doesn't change that notice to appear for examination and adjustment."

Ellen sat stiff-backed, and looked at her nails.

Karma hiccoughed once, and went back to staring at his shoulder.

George was stroking his beard. "He's right, Ellen. We can't ever hope to understand the way he feels. I'm sorry Laedo. And I don't think that Ellen and I can disclaim responsibility for what's happening. We're guilty, because we kept silent. Of course it was safer that way, but it doesn't relieve us of the blame."

"Would you *have* to kill?" asked Ellen. "Wouldn't you still have volition? I mean, couldn't you *not* kill if you wanted to?"

Laedo smiled. "I guess so," he said. "But what do I do if they feed me full of suggestion, put a blaster in my hand and set me face to face with a poor Venusian devil who's been whipped-up to the fact that I'm there to take away his land? How will I feel with my new personality? Like dying? I don't know. I just know that the thought of being *adjusted to kill,* is driving me crazy. And I'm not the only one. There have been reports of at least twenty new android-suicides in the past twenty-four hours."

HIS VOICE trailed off, and they all sat there silently for a long while.

"I won't go. That's all there is to it!" he said.

"Where won't you go?"

They all looked up to see the tall, athletic-looking android who had slipped up quietly.

He took the long cigarette-holder from between his teeth and smiled down on them. He pulled up a chair and helped himself to a drink from the bottle on the table, as Karma glared at him.

"Why don't you go away, Xanu?" asked Ellen.

Xanu's smile broadened. "What?" he said, "and deprive you lovely people of my company?" He gave her a reproachful look, and turned to Laedo. "Did you see my performance last night? No? You don't know what you're missing. Here's a couple of good seats for tomorrow's show."

He dropped them on the table, and seeing the notice, he picked it up, and started to read it.

Laedo snatched it from him.

"Get out of here!"

"So that's what's got you down. Why I've got one too. Personally, I

think it's the greatest thing that's happened to us since the emancipation."

"You're joking," gasped Ellen.

"I wonder if he is," said George.

Karma snorted, and took a drink.

"That's what I think," insisted Xanu. "It's a step upwards for us. We'll be more like humans, with real emotions. I'm told the *adjustment* will give us emotions of love as well as hate." He looked at Ellen significantly as he said this. "Oh, I can just see how my acting will improve—"

"Hell!" said Karma, and he burped.

"Yes," snapped Xanu. "I know that *you're* satisfied with things the way they are. Well they won't bother you. But I'm sick of second-class citizenship. This will mean full equality."

"To kill?" shouted Laedo. "Do we need that kind of equality? You poor stupid egotist. Don't you see that we're without the one imperfection of humans? Can't you see that they want to drag us down with them? What kind of an android are you anyway? Doesn't the thought of *adjustment* bother you?"

"That's not a very patriotic attitude in these times," was Xanu's feeble answer.

"Blah!" said Karma.

"You're drunk."

"Blah! Blah! Blah!"

"I'm not partiotic then, "said Laedo, "if you equate *patriotism,* and *war with Venus.*"

"Those could be dangerous sentiments."

"They are."

At this point Karma staggered to his feet, swinging his arms about wildly. "Get outta here you rotten flunkey! Get outta here 'fore I let go. May be a cripple, but I'll brain you. You'd like them to make us all into murderers. Get out! Get the hell out!"

Xanu moved out of Karma's reach.

"He's crazy drunk," the actor mumbled.

"You'd better get out of here," warned Laedo.

Xanu flicked a speck off his sleeve, raised both eyebrows, and stalked out of the saloon. Karma stumbled into his chair. His face was red, and he mumbled curses as he raised his glass to his lips. Laedo sighed, and buried his face in his hands.

"You should be a little more careful, darling," whispered Ellen. "Xanu has friends in high circles. He might report—"

Laedo's head snapped up. "Stop it! I can't stand that damned attitude! 'Keep Quiet!'...'Don't offend!'...'It can get you into trouble!'...Damn it all! How much worse can things get anyway?"

His outburst startled her and she tipped over a glass of wine. It spilled on her blue dress.

"I—I'm sorry, Ellen."

"It's all right Laedo. It's an old one anyway. I'd better be going. George, take me home, will you? Laedo will have to get Karma to bed. Goodnight, darling. Please don't worry too much, and don't do anything rash or get yourself into trouble."

Laedo nodded sheepishly. "I've been acting rather silly. I'm sorry. I'll be all right. See you tomorrow."

George and Ellen left, and Laedo helped Karma to his feet. The drunk android had dozed-off and he came-to reluctantly.

"Wassamadda?"

"Come on I'll get you to bed. You've had a big evening."

"Aw—it's only the beginning!"

"Yeah," said Laedo, putting Karma's arm around his neck and helping him walk, "—it's only the beginning...."

HE PUT Karma to bed, and then left the android settlement for a long walk. He didn't want to go anywhere in particular; he just wanted to think. It had rained a few hours earlier, and the streets were wet, reflecting moonlight from puddles along the upper ramp. He considered the moon, and how distorted it looked when a breeze rippled the water, and

it occured to him how all things could be distorted when the reflecting surface was at the mercy of a force that considered nothing but its own purpose.

How little men of science cared to what use their genius was perverted. They had created the "android"—a superior robot in the image of man—and now this creation too was to be used for war.

No one seemed to care what the androids themselves thought about this abridgement of the Prime Law; it occured to no one—except the androids involved—that what had been originally a necessary evil, a safety-valve, had affected the androids in such a way as to become a basic drive in itself.

Why, in the name of all cultures of Earth, did he have to be in the first group selected? In a later group—even the second—he'd have had time to do something. Raise money. Make plans. Get away securely. He laughed bitterly, wondering if there were really a place in the Solar System where an android could hide. How long would it be before all the habitable planets—from Mars to Jupiter—were dragged into the war? Not too long.

He tried to wonder—for an instant—what it would be like to be adjusted. He would be able to kill. What kind of a feeling was it, to be able to hate and kill? The thought made him nauseous and his head started to spin. He felt a sudden attack of panic that was here and there and everywhere. A general fear that swept on him so quickly that he felt himself compelled to run. He took hold of himself and focused the fear on a synthetic tree that stood off to the right of a low traffic bridge. Then he avoided it carefully and the fear went away.

He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. It would feel something like that! And then, to avoid the sense of guilt and anxiety, he would have to fix the emotion on something that could be avoided—or destroyed. The enemy. Suggestion would be used to convince him that the enemy was the cause of his anxiety, the threat to his security, and they would teach him how to destroy the scapegoat. The whole business revolted him. All he'd ever asked was to be left alone—in peace. Peace? Hah!

The first batch of android-adjustments were to be broadcast over the Medical Video-Channel, so that medical-students all over the world could observe the adjustment-technique perfected in Yorkport. This would be one time when not only medical-students and sadists would utilize that video-channel. Every android on Earth would be watching the tri-dim screen to see what was going to happen to them and how *they* would react.

Laedo wondered whether the adjustment would bring in its wake the complementary emotions of love and desire. He thought of Ellen and smiled. She would like that. She found it so hard to accept the fact that he was an android, and the lack of those emotions made anything but a platonic relationship impossible. But that was always a problem when a human became infatuated with an android. He laughed out loud thinking of the first time she had tried to—

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Laedo jumped back at the intruding shout.

"You walked right through that sentry-beam without identifying yourself. You got business in the docks at this hour?"

The man was a dock-guard. A short florid human swinging an "electric-snake" which could paralyze a man for hours upon contact.

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't know where I was walking."

"Whaddayamean? Can't you read?"

"Of course. I mean I was so deep in thought, I never looked at the sign. I'll leave immediately." He turned to walk away, but the suspicious guard

stopped him.

He had noticed the identifying band on Laedo's collar (the circle with the green "A"), and he said: "Oh, an *Andy*, huh? Just a minute. Give me your name and number. We got orders to report any suspicious actions by you guys. After the headlines these past weeks, some of your boys have been trying to leave the planet. So—"

"Laedo. Number three-four-seven-nine-two."

"Laedo? Laedo? Where'd I hear that name before?... Hey! Ain't you that Venus-lover who writes those articles for the *Directions?*"

"Not Venus-lover," said Laedo. "Just peace-lover."

"G'wan heat it. I'll give you three seconds to get off this dock before I let you feel this snake across your neck. One...two..."

Laedo didn't wait. He lashed out with his fist at the man's jutting jaw. The head snapped back, and the hands spread-eagled out. The snake dropped from his hand and slithered, throwing sparks, on the metal dock.

Recovering from the surprise blow, the guard charged at Laedo like a wounded bull at the red cape. Laedo sidestepped and hit him with the edge of his hand on the back of the neck. The fat man dropped and his wrist touched the snake. A cry of pain, and he lay there paralyzed. Laedo ran all the way back to the settlement.

HE SLEPT badly that night, and when he woke in the morning, he knew that there was nothing for him to do but to get away. He dressed, pulled out a small traveling bag, and began packing some of his personal things.

"Where do you think you're going?" It was Karma, standing in the doorway.

"Anyplace I can get to."

"Going off—as George would say—half-cocked?"

Laedo slammed a hairbrush into the bag.

"Look," he said, "you know some people in the Junker Lines. Anybody who could help me stow away?"

"Maybe I do."

"Well then, let's go."

"You're a man of action, I must say. Aren't you going to say goodbye to Ellen?"

"I'll send her a spacegram from Neptune."

"The kid's infatuated with you."

"Is that my fault? What good can it do her? She's better off this way."

Karma shrugged his good shoulder and said, "Okay. But I can't guarantee anything. It's risky business. I don't know if my friend will help. But let's go."

They left the building and took a public ground-car to the North Docks. Laedo studied the synthetic gardens that lined the thoroughfare. They were green and restful to the eye, and somehow the soothing, quieting effect annoyed him. He felt the build-up of expectancy and tension. If only he could make it off the planet....

He turned to Karma. "What are the chances?"

"Damned slight."

"Why should he take the risk of getting me aboard a Junker when he doesn't even know me?"

"He shouldn't."

"You're a lot of help. If only I had some money."

"Why don't you relax? Money wouldn't do you any good. If he does it, it won't be for money. He's a nice guy."

They walked into a long bright corridor with smooth walls that reflected the light caught at the entrance. At the third office from the left, Karma pushed a button.

"Yes?" The voice was a soft sweet one. It was a recordo.

"I want to see the dispatcher, Mr. Henderson."

"Just a moment please."

They stood there while an impression of them was flashed to Mr. Henderson's inner office. A few seconds

later the door opened.

"Dispatcher Henderson will see you now."

They walked into the anteroom and through three antechambers, as various doors slid out of sight to allow their passage. Finally they arrived at a large room which Laedo took to be Mr. Henderson's office. The dispatcher was a heavy-set man with a white scarred face that barely showed above the tremendous pile of papers on his desk. He rose as they entered.

"Hello. Hello Karma. Glad to see you. Yes indeed. Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"My friend here needs help. He wants to leave Earth."

Henderson smiled. "In the opposite direction from Venus, Eh?"

Laedo nodded.

"Risky business," said the dispatcher. "Very risky."

"I'm willing to take any risk," said Laedo. "Of course I wouldn't want to get you into any trouble."

"Any risk, eh?" mused Henderson. "Any risk? M-m-m. All right. I think we can do it."

"You don't know what this means to me Mr. Henderson. I—"

"Don't thank me *yet*," said the dispatcher, raising his hand.

He pressed a button on his desk and called for a plan of the Space-Junker, "Nancy Lee" to be flashed on his tri-dim screen.

"We'll have you crated here in the office, and then load you onto the ship. I'll have you placed in that locker there, and after the take-off you can unlock from the inside and live in the small quarters until she lands on Mars."

"What about food?" asked Karma.

"Food? Oh yes. I'll have a case of food tabs, and a drum of water, stored in the same room. You can get at that. When the ship lands, get back in the case and stay there until she's stored in the warehouse. From there, you're on your own."

Laedo sat back and breathed a heavy sigh. "I feel free already."

"If there's no hitch," said Henderson. "Nobody else knows?"

"No."

"Good. Then let's get you crated. The ship blasts off in four hours."...

THE CRATE was actually a solid durosteel container which could be opened or locked from inside or outside. It was roomy and comfortable—he could lie down and stretch out. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize what it would be like on Mars. He'd heard reports that androids were treated as the equals of native Martians.

Suddenly the box tipped, throwing him against the opposite end. Something was wrong. The men had orders not to touch the crate or enter the room until they reached Marsport. The rocking movement told him that he was being carried. A few minutes later he was dropped to the ground, and at the same time he heard the roar of the ship's jets. They had taken off, but for some reason he was not aboard.

Someone opened the cell from the outside, and the sharp slash of daylight hurt his eyes. When he became accustomed to the brightness he saw two Secret Service guards staring down at him. Standing up, he grabbed the rim of the box, and climbed out.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The guards didn't answer, but looked in the direction of three people coming across the field. It was Karma, Mr. Henderson and an officer wearing the uniform of the Peace Guards. Laedo looked from Henderson's white-scarred face to that of the officer.

"Well, well, young man," wheezed the officer, "you've been quite a bad boy. Haven't you?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, really. Playing tricks like that. Very unpatriotic. We'll have to place you under house-arrest you know."

Laedo looked at the other two men.

Henderson's face betrayed no emotion. Karma shrugged his shoulders.

"From what I can gather," whispered Karma, "Xanu reported your remarks last night. They've been watching us."

"The filthy, dirty swine. I'll—"

"Come, come, young man. That certainly is no attitude for a citizen of the Republic." He signaled the guards. "Now let's go along quietly to your settlement. The guards will keep an eye on you until the time comes for your examination." He stopped and thought for a moment. "In fact," he said, "I'm going to put in a request that you be the *first* android to become *adjusted*. That should set a good example for any others who are contemplating an escape."

He turned and walked away. The guards poked Laedo and Karma not too gently in the ribs. Laedo looked back as they walked off the field and he saw Henderson standing there with one hand on the empty crate, staring at the ground. Laedo knew that the man was finished.

He lay on the bed looking up at the twisted cracks in the ceiling. He was under arrest. It was a funny thing about being under arrest. You felt it. You knew it. And it gave you a feeling of shame, even though its only evidence was one guard standing outside the door. Karma was sitting at the table, sampling the wine.

"Would it be better," asked Laedo, "to kill myself like some of the others have done?"

"That's stupid. When you kill yourself, you're dead."

"Brilliant answer."

Karma shrugged. "Brilliant question."

Laedo rolled over on his stomach. "I'd rather kill myself."

"All right," said Karma. "So kill yourself."

"There's no reason to go on living."

Karma let go of the bottle and came over to the bed. He sat down on the edge of it. "Hey, you serious about this thing?"

Laedo nodded.

Karma shook his head. "That's not the way."

"Why not? What is the way?"

Karma didn't answer for a moment. He looked down at his shoulder, and then straight into Laedo's eyes.

"To live," he said. "No matter how tough it gets. No matter how bad it looks. To go on living, and using whatever abilities or capacities you were created with—or have left when some of them are taken away from you. To go on fighting for what you believe in, no matter how useless things seem. And when the end does have to come, make it pay. Make it all worth something; let yourself be heard, instead of going off in a corner and dying like a beaten, sniveling human being would do it. That's the answer."

HE STOPPED—awkward and embarrassed at having said so much. He started to head back for the bottle, but Laedo held his arm.

"All right. Self-realization, I accept that. But doesn't there come a time, when that's impossible? Now for instance? If they adjust *me,* what kind of fulfillment is there after that? Isn't death preferable to that? God! If there was one single thing worth living for, I could see it. All I can see after tomorrow is that I'll be a creature that kills.

"Don't you see my point? When there's *nothing*—no way to use my ability to think rationally or act voluntarily; when I can't write what I believe in, or say what I want to—then there *is* reason for suicide At that point there's more self-realization in death than in life."

Karma got off the bed and poured himself a glass of wine.

"Give me one too," said Laedo. He got up and walked over to the table. "Don't you see my viewpoint?"

"Yes. But it's based on a false premise."

"What?"

"There *is* something you can do. It would change the course of history."

Laedo sank into a chair. "You picked a rotten time to be funny."

"I'm not being funny." Karma's voice was hard. "I've done a lot of thinking about this, and I have an idea."

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Laedo called. Karma stopped speaking and went back to the wine.

"Darling! What happened?" Ellen burst into the room. "What's wrong? Why are you under arrest?"

Laedo told her the events of the day, and she sank limply into a seat. She looked at him accusingly. "You'd have gone off without even saying goodbye to me?"

"He was going to send you a spacegram from Neptune," said Karma.

Laedo cursed him under his breath. "I'm sorry, Ellen, but there wasn't any time to do anything, it all happened so fast. Even then we were too slow for our friend, Xanu."

Ellen looked at Karma and her expression said that she wanted to be alone with Laedo. Karma nodded and started for the door. Then he came back and took the bottle. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Take it. But don't get too drunk. I want to hear that idea of yours."

When Karma left, Ellen said to Laedo: "Darling, what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're not going to do anything foolish, are you?"

"My dear, this is tragedy. Tragedy is never foolish. It's noble. Heroic. But never foolish."

She ignored his sarcasm. "What are your plans?"

"Whatever they are, Ellen, it's time you learned that they don't—they couldn't ever—include you."

He watched her stiffen. "Can't you understand," he said, "that what you want from me is impossible? I'm android. I haven't the human emotions of love or tenderness, nor their complements—hate, and the desire to kill."

"But you will—tomorrow."

He studied her. "Is that what you're counting on?"

She nodded.

"I wouldn't if I were you."

She laughed. "What else is there for me? I love you, and I'd rather have you that way, than not at all. I'm not noble, and I won't give you up. I'm sorry for you; but I'm glad for myself. Glad, because then you'll want me. And that means more to me than anything in the world."

Laedo didn't say anything. She kissed him on the forehead, and then she left. When she was gone, he took out another bottle from the cabinet, and sucked at it in long pulls. He felt it begin to warm his stomach, and he lay down in the bed and stared at the ceiling until everything grew fuzzy. Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

"NO! I WON'T. I won't go. You can't force—"

"Sh-h-h-h," whispered Karma, tottering over the bed where he had just shaken Laedo out of a feverish sleep. "Shaddup 'r you'll wake the whole Gen'ral staff. Sh-h-h-h..."

"What—What's the matter?"

"Come t'tell you m'plan."

"You're drunk."

"Figgered this out when I wuz sober-er-er," smirked Karma, rolling his tongue joyfully on his r's. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and began to babble. "Now. Important thing 's that you're first. Goin' t'make an example of you. Now. Every android 'n the world'll be watchin' that medical-channel, so..."

Laedo listened to the slurring, stumbling voice as it went on to reveal a startling plan. As the drunk spoke on,

Laedo grew more and more afraid. When Karma finished, Laedo just sat there with bis face buried in his hands.

"I wonder," he said bitterly, "what it will feel like. I just hope I don't live too long afterwards...."

In the morning they came for him. They woke him (he wasn't really asleep), and they asked him to change into his best clothes. He was going to appear on video, and a fresh appearance would be desirable, they told him. He obliged them. Should he wear the collar with the "A" on it?

The attendant thought that he should wear it before the operation. Then after it was over he could take it off. It would be symbolic, and it would set a precedent.

"Like coming into manhood?" Laedo asked.

"Yes, that's it."

"I'm going to set a precedent. How nice."

The attendant wasn't sure whether Laedo was being nasty so he snapped:

"Hurry up! We can't wait all day."

It would soon be over.

The physical and psychological examination was a cursory thing. He stood in various positions, in various stages of undress, and answered hundreds of questions. The indignity of the whole business disgusted him, he moved and answered as if in a dream. Finally his chart was stamped, "O.K. for adjustment."

They usbered him into a long white room lined with operating tables, and it looked for all the world like an assembly line. The walls were lined with video-transmitters, and a man with a white beard announced—for the benefit of the video-audience—the basic technic that would be used. Laedo was introduced to the doctor who was going to perform the operation on him. He studied the small wizened human being, and—for a second—the old panic welled up inside of him. He felt as if he were going to be sick right there, but he turned his mind to other things, and soon they made ready.

They helped him undress, laid him on the operating table, and gave him a local anaesthetic. He watched the doctor standing over him. The wrinkled toothless little face with white hair. Beads of perspiration on the aged forehead.

He was being cut into now. He knew it. A small slice here and there, and he would be a different creature.... The pressure in his brain caused a kaliedioscopic effect, a whirling nightmare of light and shade and color that made him strain at the plastic bonds that held him to the table....

And then it stopped; his mind cleared.

The doctor came over and looked into his eyes.

And it was all over.

He was cold and emotionless at first, but as he remembered the thing that he bad to do, hate and anger welled up in him. A button, pressed somewhere, released him. He sat up slowly.

So that androids all over the world who were watching, would understand, he shouted:

"I establish a precedent for the rest of you to follow! Do as I do, to those who would turn us into killers!"

He reached out as he spoke, and with his android hands he did what this human being had made it possible for him to do. With hate and bitterness in his heart, he strangled the doctor until the body slipped limply from his grasp—

He knew that he was about to be destroyed. But be would be a martyr, and his act would give all androids strength and a weapon with which to protect themselves. At least he had served a purpose.

He smiled bitterly, as they came for him, because for some reason he suddenly had an intense longing for Ellen.

THE END

It was the voice of Colonel Hein.

"YOUR STORY ought to go in a case book, Leslie," said the smiling psychologist. "But it needs filling in.

"I understand sibling domination, we run into it frequently. You carried an extraordinarily large portion of it. I can understand your feeling of guilt and frustration. You believed you killed him in the Everglades, for...mistreating your sweetheart.

"Then, realizing that he was still alive, you attributed an irrational kind of invulnerability to him and experienced the full force of that primal domination once more.

"You felt he could not be stopped, certainly not by you, and that you could never break his ancient hold upon you. But tell me, once you had broken that bond, how could you be so utterly sure he would meet your challenge?"

"Did you see his body?"

"Yes, incredibly ugly."

"No resemblance between us?"

"None that I could see."

"And yet once there was," said Dirk. "And that is the whole point. Marc was very seriously disfigured in a jet accident. Perhaps his mind was also affected, or the disfigurement might explain his personality.

"Anyway, major, I knew Marc because under our exteriors we were the same flesh and blood, the same gene structure, the same in every basic respect—we were *identical twins!*

● END

THE COVER CONTEST

Here are the winners for the November 1951 issue:

1st Prize goes to Wm. F. Hall, Dallas, Texas, for: *ANOTHER* LAW REPEALED?
2nd Prize goes to J. T. Oliver, Columbus, Ga., for: PAGING MR. NEWTON!
3rd Prize goes to R. W. Hartigan, St. Paul, Minn., for: *HUH?*
4th Prize goes to Jan Romanoff, Lomita, Calif., for: HEY!
5th and 6th Prizes (tie) go to Douglas McDonnell, San Francisco, Calif., and Mrs. Rory M. Faulkner, Covina, Calif., for: OOPS!

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